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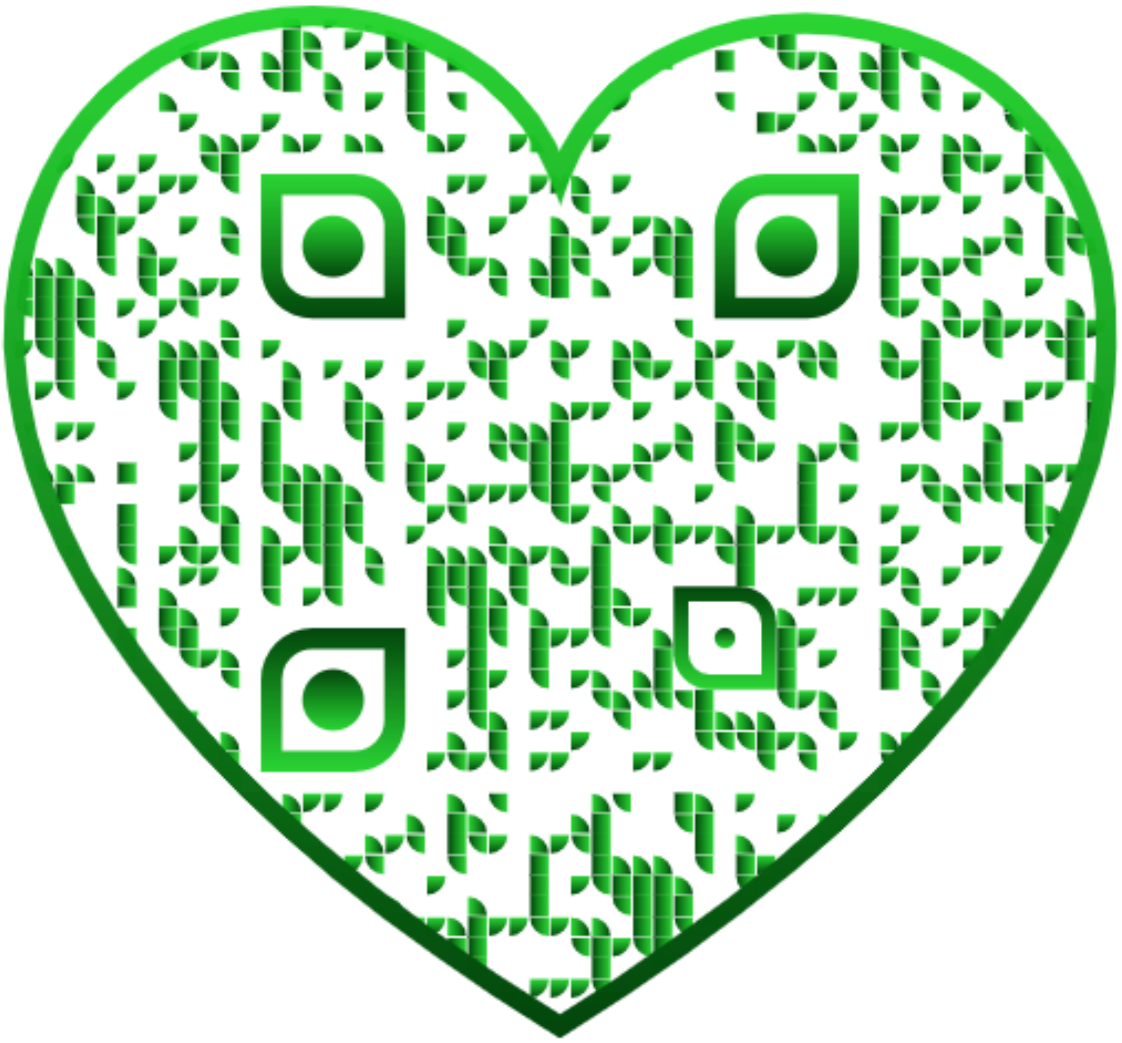

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Ceasefire now!

On the eve of this year's WOMADelaide Palestinian rap group 47Soul revealed that they'd had their invitation to perform at the festival postponed until 2025 with the festival director Ian Scobie saying that it was because the group could not *'be presented safely',* saying that when they made the decision they were unsure if 47Soul could be *'a cohesive part of the discussion [on] the unfolding situation in the Middle East.'* In their statement 47Soul said that the decision *'feeds into the narrative of Palestinians being an inherent source of danger to others'* and that it *'stops short of including Palestinians at a time when amplifying Palestinian voices could not be more critical.'* This last point was felt at the event, reviewed on p76, where we have the curious situation of Ukraine's DakhaBrakha protesting the war in Ukraine but protest against the war in Gaza being left to non-Palestinians, such as Tunisian singer EMEL.

It's reported that at least 1,139 people died when Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, with 240 people being taken hostage, of which 101 are still in captivity. In the ensuing war over 31,000 Palestinians have so far died, with the International Court of Justice requesting Israel to provide humanitarian aid as Palestinians are *'at imminent risk of genocide.'*

When English Jewish director Jonathan Glazer received his recent Oscar he lamented the cost of the conflict on "innocent people." His statement has since drawn praise and scorn in equal measures, subsequent reaction generating more media coverage than any statement from those directly affected by the conflict. In a lengthy, cover feature for *TIME* magazine Jewish legal scholar Noah Feldman attempted to explain how difficult it is to discuss the conflict, but the end result made it more confusing. He begins by saying that it *'is not inherently antisemitic to criticize Israel'* but adds a major caveat later, arguing that we *'run the risk of perpetuating antisemitism by condemning the Jewish state,'* because it denies the Jewish people their historically oppressed status.

Songlines has long been a platform for oppressed voices, and this will continue. The war in Gaza must end, there are too many lives being lost. And we will continue to acknowledge the historical oppression of Jewish people, as we have always done, but these two aims should not be mutually exclusive. In this issue, we have two features on the Middle East, which show how a community of musicians has emerged across Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia. They are united by a togetherness that we need to see across the entire region, never mind across all media. Our only ideology is humanity.

Russ Slater Johnson, Editor

CONTRIBUTORS THIS ISSUE INCLUDE

Mateusz Dobrowolski
A performer and teacher of the Eastern European frame drum, Mateusz travels from his home in Warsaw, Poland, to Ukraine, to experience the fractious cultural life of Kyiv during wartime (p71).

Jameela Siddiqi
Jameela is an award-winning broadcaster, novelist, journalist and educator of Indian classical music, dance and poetry. She has reviewed for *Songlines* since the first issue. She profiles the Sabri Brothers on p68.

Oli Warwick
A freelance music journalist exploring leftfield music from across the world for more than 15 years, Oli surveys the vibrant experimental scenes emanating from the Middle East and North Africa on p28.

Songlines was launched in 1999 and is the definitive magazine for world music – music that has its roots in all parts of the globe, from Mali to Mexico, India to Iraq. Whether this music is defined as traditional, contemporary, folk or fusion, *Songlines* is the only magazine to truly represent and embrace it. However, *Songlines* is not just about music, but about how the music fits into the landscape; it's about politics, history and identity. Delivered in both print and digital formats, *Songlines*, through its extensive articles and reviews, is your essential and independent guide to a world of music and culture, whether you are starting on your journey of discovery or are already a seasoned fan.

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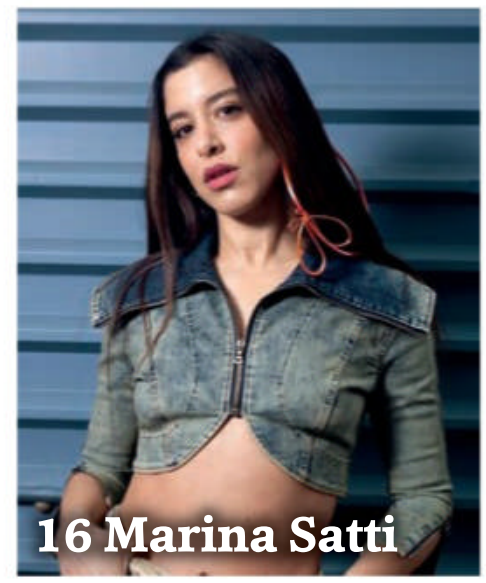
68 Sabri Brothers

Piranha Records



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Yannis Kelemenis

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Courtesy of Soy Sauce Records

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Afro-Brazilian Spiritual Albums

"My community frowned on the notion of women singing. But with the onslaught by Siad Barre's Somalia in the 80s, they had other worries on their mind"

Somaliland singer and freedom-fighter Sahra Halgan tells us about her new projects: an album and a centre for women's creativity in her homeland, see p38

TOP OF THE WORLD

On this issue's compilation – our curated selection of new music and bonus tracks from across the globe

TOP OF THE WORLD TRACKS

01

01 **Sahra Halgan** 'Laga'

From *Hiddo Dhawr* on DANAYA

Somaliland's foremost voice returns in full force with this groove and blues-heavy cut. Backed by her trio's slinky basslines and gritty guitar riffs, she delivers an infectious, charming chorus. **See p44**

02

02 **Mohammad Syfkhan** 'Do You Have a Lover or Not?'

From *I am Kurdish* on Nyahh Records

A fiery debut: percussion drives Syfkhan's electric, far-reaching and rhythmic *buzuq*, all dancing smoothly around his warm vocals. **See p60**

03

03 **Ngwaka Son Systéme** 'Zanga Mbongo'

From *Iboto Ngenge* on Eck Echo

Soukous and Congolese rumba inspire a punchy dance anthem from the DRC's new eight-piece: dirty beats, potent chants and sparkling guitar riffs. We couldn't ask for more! **See p45**

04

04 **Leyla McCalla** 'Sun Without the Heat'

From *Sun Without the Heat* on ANTI–

McCalla's rich voice takes centre stage in an indie-acoustic reflection on the importance of taking the bad with the good, an emblem of her album confronting urgency while embracing the fun life can be. **See p51**

05

05 **Aguidavi do Jêje** 'Na Palha do Dendê'

From *Aguidavi do Jêje* on Rocinante

Another astonishing debut: 18 percussionists show their chops as they pay homage to Afro-Brazilian instruments, *orixá* deities and culture in a deliciously off-kilter, rhythmic feast. **See p48**

06

06 **David Murphy** 'Sean O'Duibhir a'Ghleanna'

From *Cuimhne Ghlinn: Explorations in Irish Music for Pedal Steel Guitar* on Rollercoaster Records

Pipes and pedal steel provide spectral moods on this deeply atmospheric update of a centuries-old tune. **See p56**

07

07 **Aoife O'Donovan** 'Crisis'

From *All My Friends* on Yep Roc Records

Supported by an all-star cast – including brass band The Westerlies and mandolin whizz Sierra Hull – O'Donovan reflects on Carrie Chapman Catt's struggle for suffrage in America. **See p49**

08

08 **Marthe x Pilani Bubu** 'Imbokodo'

From *Nay' Indaba* on L'Oreille en Friche

South African Bubu joins the French brass band for a powerful, rolling tribute to togetherness in the apartheid struggle, calling out to the Women's March of 1956 and the Soweto Uprising of 1976. **See p64**

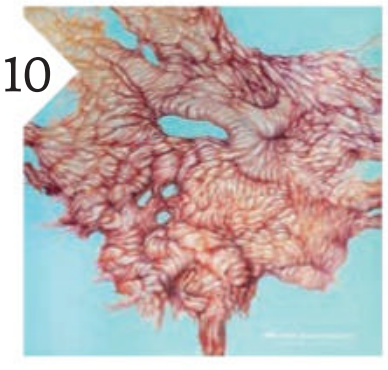
09

09 **Amsterdam Klezmer Band** 'On Mala'

From *Bomba Pop* on Vetnasj Records

A whirling, twirling, whistling and thoroughly upbeat klezmer-esque dose of mesmeric brass and *bomba* lifted from this project's 18th (!) album. **See p54**

10



10 **Mama Longhorn** 'Rowing High Rowing Low'

From *Extinct but Still Alive* on Soit Se Silti

Meditative yet playful: soaring bass, slow beats, shimmering melodies and Eeva Poijärvi's full-bodied voice are melded together to entrancing effect. **See p62**

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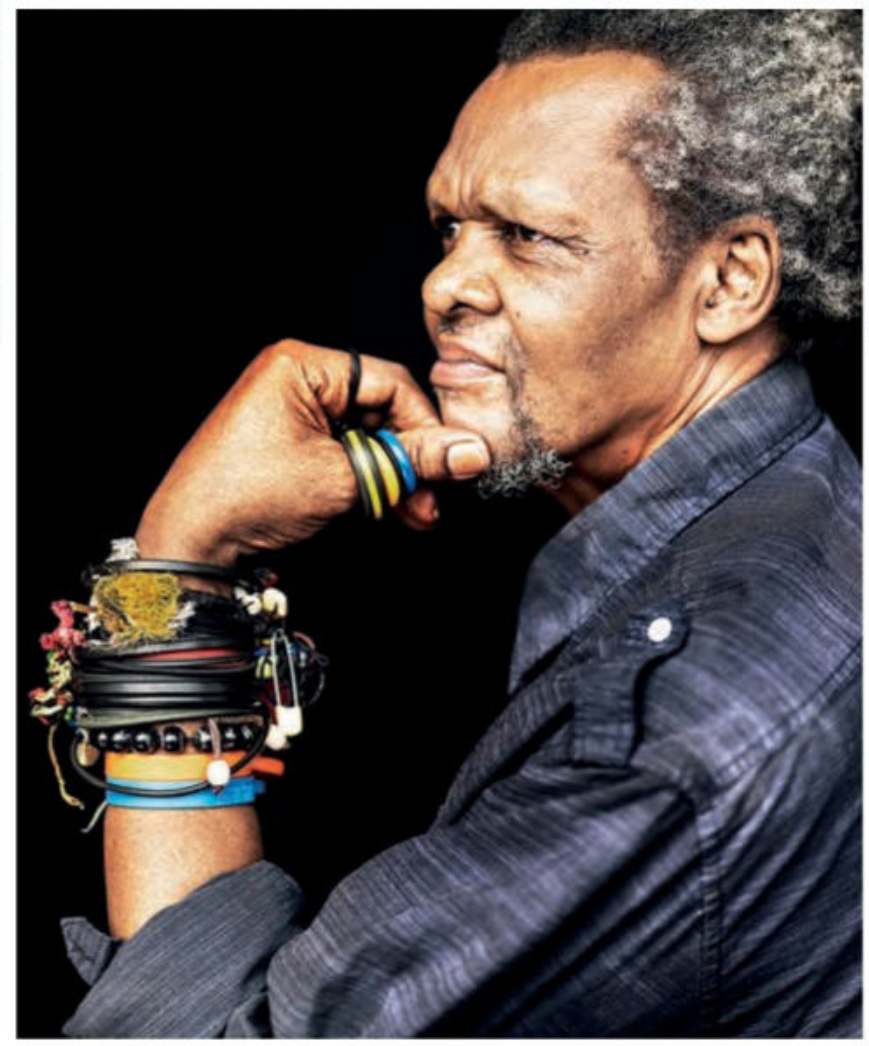


David Raccuglia

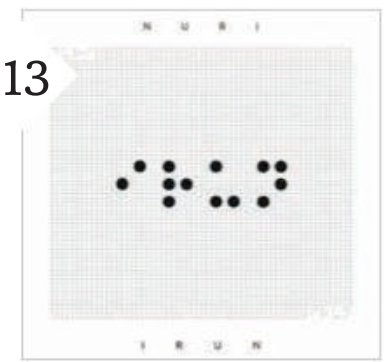
+ BONUS TRACKS

11 **EMEL**
'Souty'
From *MRA* on Yotanka Records

EMEL's new album sees her backed by an all-female production and band, combining rippling bass beats, floating melodies and a glorious chorus to back her sweet vocals. **See p24**

12 **Mexican Institute of Sound**
'My America is Not Your America (feat Graham Coxon)'
From *Algo-Ritmo: Mexican Institute of Sound Hits 2004-2024* on Soy Sauce

A brass-electronic-funk delight. **See p18**

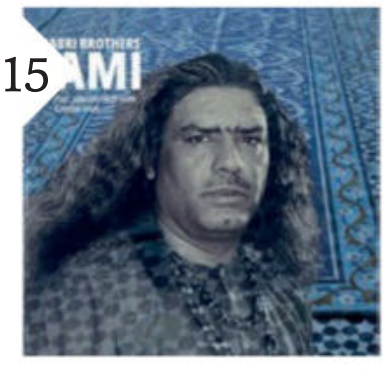


13 **Nuri**
'Yiri'
From *IRUN* on Shouka

Mysterious drummer Nuri melds field recordings of African folk traditions with frenzied rhythms and nuanced electronica in heady explorations of North African trance. **See p28**

14 **Lonnie Holley**
'I am a Part of the Wonder (feat Moor Mother)'
From *Oh Me Oh My* on Jagjaguwar

An opiate case of global praise, Holley and Moor Mother waxing spiritual over an Afro-futurist flux invigorated with jazz rhythms, horns and synth-led melodies. **See p66**



15 **Sabri Brothers**
'Tana Farsuda Jan'
From *Jami* on Piranha Records

Ghulam Farid Sabri introduced *qawwali* to the West with his brother Maqbool Ahmed. Here, he performs with his son, Amjad, on an exemplary specimen of the devotional form from 1991. **See p68**

"Jackie Wilson's 'Lonely Teardrops' taught me how to listen to the slower songs and get something different out of them. That's when I started listening to the words and not just the beat"

Turn to p66 to hear sculptor, visual artist, musician and educator Lonnie Holley discuss his art and late-in-life music career

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Time to Protest

Alarmed by the far-right surge, ***Cara de Espelho*** *have gathered members of some of Portugal's best-loved bands to create something new, and urgently needed.* ***Gonçalo Frota*** *meets the group and attends one of their first shows*

Carlos Guerreiro had not felt an adrenaline rush like this since he was 15. That was during the years of the *Estado Novo* – the Portuguese dictatorship that endured for nearly half a century (1926-1974) – when he was still a kid but often being summoned to take the stage with some of the most prominent protest singers of the era, the legendary José Afonso among them. Guerreiro was never arrested, although he knew the regime's police could storm any impromptu show that he played. "This feeling has nothing to do with the music itself or with the artistic life, but with this fear," he says. "I never felt that again, but maybe one day we will play a concert and some far-right guy will come after us."

Cara de Espelho are a Portuguese supergroup made up of Carlos Guerreiro (from Gaiteiros de Lisboa), brothers Pedro da Silva Martins and Luis José Martins (Deolinda), Maria Antónia Mendes (former singer of A Naifa and Señoritas), Nuno Prata (Ornatos Violeta) and Sérgio Nascimento (Humanos). In recent years, whenever they met backstage at festivals and concerts, they kept promising to get together and work on a new project, but it took the looming rise of the far-right in the country for them to find the right trigger. Cara de Espelho (which translates as 'mirror-face') is a musical way of Portugal looking at itself, acknowledging its virtues and, mostly, its flaws.

Along with Pedro da Silva Martins' special knack for writing catchy tunes with poignant lyrics, and the band's marvellous arrangements (owing to Portuguese folk traditions, post-punk and Arabic twists), Maria Antónia Mendes sings about a country dealing with hate speech, tax evasion, political corruption, its supposed authenticity, populist strategies, police violence, deregulated neoliberalism and the mythologised and troubling way Portugal looks at its own history as a coloniser.

"I was done with music," confesses Mendes, "And I was enjoying my newfound life, with free weekends, when Sérgio first called me up and caused me a problem with this invitation to join them. I only left my sofa to sing these words. I'm old enough not to be singing unrequited love songs. I feel it's urgent for us to raise our voices, to fight this much-needed struggle, and to hold an ironised mirror in front of some ridiculous, albeit embellished, ideas that are circulating around us."

Clockwise from top right: Carlos Guerreiro; Pedro da Silva Martins; Cara de Espelho at the end of the show; Maria Antónia Mendes

Joana César

Carlos Guerreiro (left) with his 'peculiar' instruments and Gonçalo Marques (right)

It all started, as Pedro da Silva Martins recalls, with a phone call from Guerreiro and Nascimento asking him to write the songs for their new band. He instantly accepted, as long as he was allowed to join the band too. And so Cara de Espelho were born, Martins penning the songs that Guerreiro would then arrange with his array of peculiar and home-built instruments. Although the arrangements would be adapted by Luís José Martins on guitar and Nuno Prata on bass, his imprint is a major part of Cara de Espelho's identity.

When *Songlines* visits the band during rehearsals for the first few concerts, Guerreiro takes us on a tour around the table where his instruments rest. There is a regular hurdy-gurdy alongside another that plays a single-note drone, operated by a sewing machine pedal going through a bicycle wheel; lying next to a series of flutes, there is a unique '*carretofone*', a string instrument built out of a pan and the reel of a fishing rod, that we can hear in the song 'Testa de Ferro'; finally, there's the '*túbaros de Orfeu*', elongated plastic tubes he blows into to provide bass notes to some of the tracks. Guerreiro, who has shared the stage with José Afonso, Fausto and José Mário Branco, the greatest Portuguese protest singers prior to the Carnation Revolution in 1974, simply says this about his unusual instruments: "We may be bleeding inside, but we still have to find some humour."

Cara de Espelho fine-tuned the show they have been putting on since February, in Cineteatro D. João V, in Amadora, on the outskirts of Lisbon, just around the corner from where Pedro and Luis grew up and their parents owned a restaurant. Pedro recalls when he and his friends liked to disrupt the shows that took place in that same venue during their adolescence. Now he is on stage, teasing the audience with words that aim to put an end to political apathy.

Deolinda also took their first steps in the neighbourhood. The fictional character that, to some extent, was the narrator of the band's songs, took inspiration from a suburban perspective on Portugal's idiosyncrasies. With Deolinda, Pedro da Silva Martins was already venturing into critical and satirical songs. And none made more of an impact than 'Parva Que Sou' (How Stupid of Me), a stinging take on today's working world that had for a chorus the lyrics '*how stupid a world, where you need to study in order to be a slave.*'

"I don't know if I can call it the power of a song, but at the time I realised how strong a song can be in a particular context," says Pedro regarding 'Parva Que Sou'. "I also learned about all the manipulation that can happen around a song. That is also present in what we are doing now as Cara de Espelho. This is surely an artistic path that I'm drawn to and I do feel the need for this kind of communication. We have to be annoying and inconvenient to some, we have to point fingers and hit where it hurts. This is also an exercise in democracy, and it is crucial that we do it using our tools – music, that is."

At one of Cara de Espelho's first shows, in Lisbon, the musical prowess and excellence of the songs on their self-titled debut (which they play alongside a few unreleased tracks) is clear; these are songs rooted in popular rhythms but porous to a modern and electric twist. What's more, there is an unquestionable instant bond with the audience, who are likewise troubled by the surge of the far-right. On March 10, a week after the show, Portugal's general election confirms the dramatic rise of its far-right Chega party (who now hold 48 of 230 seats in Parliament).

When they finish the show, get rid of their instruments (except for a drum and a flute) and gather together front of stage to sing 'Varejeiras', there is a sense that they are going to the streets in protest. At that moment, Cara de Espelho hold up another mirror, not only unveiling the divisiveness of political speech, but also suggesting that each one of us leaves our own seats and joins them.

***+ Cara de Espelho** is reviewed this issue, see p56*

THE **GLOBE** AT A **GLANCE**

INDIA: British producer Kuljit Bhamra unveiled the world's first electronic *tabla* at an event in New Delhi… **ISRAEL:** Iranian-Israeli singer Liraz, who lost family members during the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, and who knew hostages who have since died during the ensuing war, was at the House of Lords in March to support the #MeToo_Unless_Ur_A_Jew campaign, which is asking for the voice of Jewish women to be heard, especially in light of a UN envoy report which stated that there are *'reasonable grounds'* to believe Hamas committed rape, *'sexualized torture,'* and other cruel and inhumane treatment of women attacked and captured… **JAMAICA:** the UK's Privy Council has overturned the murder conviction of Jamaican dancehall artist Vybz Kartel following an appeal. Kartel, whose real name is Adija Palmer, was given a life sentence in 2014 for the murder of Clive 'Lizard' Williams in Jamaica. The successful appeal argued that a juror accused of bribery should not have been on the trial. It is now down to Jamaican authorities to decide if there should be a retrial… **JAPAN:** Shigeichi Negishi, a Japanese engineer who created the first-ever karaoke machine in 1967, has died at the age of 100. Negishi never patented the design, believing it would be *'too much hassle'*… **MALI:** A fundraiser has been set-up for Alkibar Junior, a group from Niafunké (who studied under Ali Farka Touré) who lost all their musical equipment after being attacked by jihadists in December last year. Donations can be made via https://gofund.me/2da26dee… **US:** Billy Strings, Molly Tuttle & Golden Highway and Hurray for the Riff Raff were the big winners at the 2024 International Folk Music Awards which took place in Kansas City as part of Folk Alliance International…

Hurray for the Riff Raff

Tommy Kha

Taavi Arus

Hot Contest

Lyre duo Puuluup have teamed up with countrymen 5Miinust to represent Estonia at this year's Eurovision Song Contest in Malmö, Sweden this May. alyona alyona and Marina Satti, representing Ukraine and Greece, are other notable entries, though many are refusing to watch the contest amid boycotts and petitions over Israel's participation.

Catharina Gerritsen

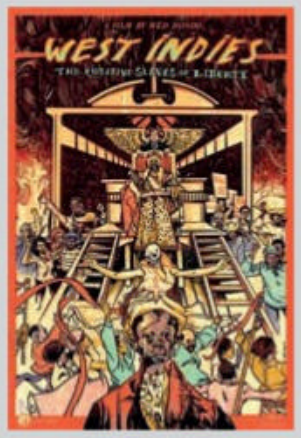
All Guns Blazing

Turkish psych rockers Altın Gün have announced that lead vocalist Merve Daşdemir will leave the band after shows in April and May. After that the group will continue as a five-piece. In an Instagram post they wrote that, '*After almost eight years* [Merve has] *decided to start a new musical chapter. Although it's sad, it's a choice we fully support and understand.*'

Ray Burmiston

Nitin Back Together

Nitin Sawhney had a double heart operation after a heart attack in early March. He suffered further injuries after falling on a glass table following the attack. Tour dates in March, including WOMADelaide, were cancelled, but all April dates will go ahead as planned. About two weeks after the attack, Sawhney tweeted, '*I'm feeling pretty good… Thank you for all your lovely well wishes.*'



Sailing to a Cinema Near You

West Indies: The Fugitive Slaves of Liberty (1979) was the first musical from Africa. Based on the novel *Les Negriers* (The Slavers) by Daniel Boukman, it was directed by the Mauritanian-French Med Hondo, and was an extravagant critique of colonial rule and slavery. An official 4K restoration of the film has been screened at New York's Film Forum, with other screenings to come.

IT'S HAPPENING

GREEN ISLAND FESTIVAL (June 15, July 27 & September 7) will transform Hulme, Manchester into a metropolitan paradise with headliners including Afriquoi, Senegalese rap pair Defmaa Maadef and Afro-Cuban collective Mangorata… This year's **WOMAD** (July 25-28) includes Amadou & Mariam, Sampa the Great, *kora* giant Seckou Keita and Sangjaru, a group blending Gypsy jazz with Korean traditions… **UNDERNEATH THE STARS** (August 2-4), a highlight in Yorkshire's arts, is hosting Kate Rusby, Katherine Priddy, Rumba de Bodas and Keston Cobblers Club… Youssou N'Dour, Balimaya Project and cascading traditional melodies from both Scotland (Breabach) and Estonia (Cätlin & Marko Mägi) will be at **EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL** (August 2-25)… **FOLKEAST** (August 16-18) in Suffolk will boast the Kris Drever Band, Angeline Morrison, Blowzabella and the fine duo of Martin Carthy and Jon Wilks… This year's **SHREWSBURY FOLK FESTIVAL** (August 23-26) will feature South Africa's Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Suntou Susso, Irish-Spanish crossover El Pony Pisador and Jacqui McShee's Pentangle… Birmingham's **SUPERSONIC FESTIVAL** (August 30 – September 1) will host Kurdish/Syrian singer and *buzuq* player Mohammad Syfkhan, Bonnie 'Prince' Billy and Brìghde Chaimbeul

SE COMPRAN

Currently on the Songlines stereo…

Aynur Doğan 'Hekîmo'
Aynur's voice builds and builds, then pauses, and builds again. With just sax accompaniment, it's a knock-out.

Caetano Veloso 'La Mer'
Stark voice-and-guitar take on Charles Trenet's classic 1946 *chanson*. Made for Christine Angot's film *Une Famille*.

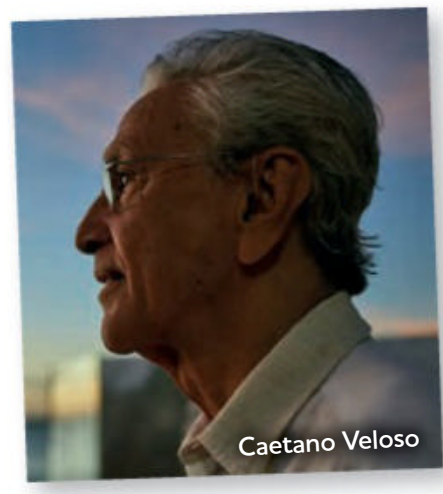
Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin 'Siren Spring'
Jaunty piano belies political heft in a protest for the ages. Bandcamp profits go to legal fees for pro-Palestine activists.

Felukah 'Batwanes Beek'
Punchy, beat-driven take on a Warda Al-Jazairia song from a singer becoming known as Egypt's 'neo-soul *rap* queen.'

Myriam Gendron 'Long Way Home'
Plangent vocals from the Québécois Gendron who is clearly in form, with new album *Mayday* on the horizon.

Hermanos Gutiérrez 'Low Sun'
Flickering guitars from Swiss-Ecuadorian brothers whose sparse, rhythmic instrumentals keep mesmerising.

Kanika Kapoor & Ria Sean 'KOKA'
Energetic Punjabi beats are fused with vibrant Afrobeats rhythms. An explosive cross-cultural track.



Fernando Young

Willie Stewart

Mohammad Syfkhan

After tragedy, the Kurdish musician left Syria for Ireland. There he found a community of musicians. "I love them," he tells ***Daniel Spicer***

How do we define our roots, our nationality, something as simple as where we call home? For singer and *buzuq* player, Mohammad Syfkhan, the question is anything but simple. A Kurdish musician, originally from Syria, his debut solo album, *I Am Kurdish*, presents a selection of popular and traditional Middle Eastern and North African tunes, as well as his sole original – a proud anthem and the album's title-track. Yet, since 2016, he's been firmly based in Ireland. The album was recorded in County Wicklow and, alongside Syfkhan's strident vocals and urgent buzuq, features guest musicians, saxophonist Cathal Roche from County Sligo and Cork-based cellist Eimear Reidy.

Syfkhan's long, arduous journey to this joyous cultural crossover began at the turn of the 1980s when he started playing music while studying nursing. After graduating in 1983, he moved to the city of Raqqa, Syria, began performing professionally and formed his own group, the Al-Rabie Band. This outfit, which he says included "a buzuk, a guitar, a keyboard, a drum and a *tabla*," became extremely popular, performing at parties, weddings and festivals all over Syria, playing a mix of popular Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish and Western songs, and some of Syfkhan's originals.

However, Syfkhan's happy life as a musician and surgical nurse came crashing down when war broke out in Syria in 2011 and his life was visited by intense sorrow and trauma. After one of his sons was murdered by ISIS, he and his family, fearing for their lives, had no choice but to leave their home behind. "I fled from Syria to Turkey," he tells me, "and we rode rubber boats, called death boats, to Greece. I stayed in Greece for two months, after which we moved to Ireland through the mediation of the UN." While three of Syfkhan's sons were resettled in Germany, he began a new life in Ireland with his wife and young daughter.

"My English was about five per cent, so music was my primary language," he recalls. Taking every opportunity he could to perform music at private parties and concerts, Syfkhan soon came to the attention of Ireland's open-eared underground folk community. In fact, one of the first people he met after arriving in Ireland was Cormac MacDiarmada, fiddle player with Dublin's contemporary folk darlings Lankum. "I have gotten to know a lot of musicians here in Ireland," Syfkhan says. "I love them all. Musicians in Ireland are wonderful people. There is no distinction between where you are from or what your language is. The most important thing is that you are a person with a beautiful soul and your music is beautiful."

In 2023, Syfkhan performed for his biggest audience yet, opening for Lankum at a sold-out show at the Cork Opera House. With the release in February of *I Am Kurdish* on the County Leitrim-based DIY label Nyahh Records – followed the same month by his first ever UK live performance at The Rose Hill in Brighton – he looks set to win many more fans.

+ *I Am Kurdish* *is a Top of the World this issue, see p60. 'Do You Have a Lover or Not?' is on our compilation, track 2*

Kingdom Come

***Robin Denselow** heads to Saudi Arabia to find integrated crowds, local groups searching for an identity and a very surprising rush to the stage*

Until six years ago, men and women weren't even allowed to attend concerts together in Saudi Arabia, but here was Chaka Khan singing 'I'm Every Woman' and telling her mixed audience to "get on up." There have been pop shows in the Kingdom before but this was a government-funded festival at a venue where the audience were supposed to remain seated. How should they react? They didn't just start dancing but rushed to the foot of the stage. "Things have really changed," said Mazen Lawand, guitarist with the Saudi Arabian 'alternative fusion' band Garwasha.

The first Riyadh International Jazz festival, which took place February 7-9 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, was an intriguing affair. The Mayadeen exhibition hall, out in the ancient Diriyah region, had been transformed into a plush 1,800-seat venue, with video screens showing old footage of jazz dancers and then close-ups of the artists. The large stage was decorated with fan designs and giant lamp-stands, like some 1930s art-deco jazz club and (apart from the dreadful opening to Chaka Khan's set) the sound was mostly excellent. Outside, among the palm trees in the VIP area, local artists sang jazz standards while guests were treated to tea and cakes. There was, of course, no alcohol.

The headliners were all international artists, but each of the three nights began with local musicians. First up was fulana (aka Nadine Lingawi), a singer-songwriter from Jeddah who explained that her stage name means "'anonymous woman' – because when I started it wasn't acceptable for women to be making music, so I posted it anonymously online." She said she grew up listening to Britney Spears and loved the Canadian indie-rock band Metric. She didn't wear a headscarf and was accompanied by a keyboard player for a set of accomplished Western-sounding pop songs in English with no hint of local influences – though there was applause when she finally started singing in Arabic. She said that very few other Saudi women singers wrote their own songs, but many were doing jazz covers.

Majaz, from Bahrain, were more distinctive, mixing cello with electric guitar, bass and drums for a jazz-rock fusion set that incorporated influences from the Gulf and Africa. They were at their best when they switched to passages of handclaps and chanting. Finally came Garwasha, an all-male Saudi band playing electric guitar, bass and drums, but with a Sudanese keyboard player. They said they were using rhythms and melodies from across the country (insisting that they should be as influential as Brazilian styles) in an assured, all-instrumental jazz-rock set that featured rapid-fire, but never over-flashy, guitar work from Lawand. They were at their best with cool and atmospheric late-night pieces that deserve to be heard beyond the Kingdom.

Apart from Chaka, there was fine (and well-received) British jazz from YolanDa Brown and Kokoroko and a glorious global music tour from Australia's The Cat Empire, who switched from brass-backed Latin styles to country-rock and even Seychellois *sega*. This lavish, easy-going festival was produced by the Ministry of Culture's Music Commission, whose CEO Paul Pacifico (ex-UK Association of Independent Music) said that a "seismic cultural shift is underway... the line is moving the whole time". It will be fascinating to see how far it goes. *ROBIN DENSELOW*

Clockwise from top: Chaka Khan; Majaz; YolanDa Brown; fulana

The 4 Corners and Centre of Enji's Universe

The Munich-based Mongolian singer takes flight to spiritual jazz, finds comfort in wisdom and loses herself with the perfect page-turner before honing in on a home favourite

Abbey Lincoln
Abbey is Blue
(Riverside, 1959)

Abbey is one of the most important voices in jazz. She's not as popular as Ella [Fitzgerald] but she has that very strong characteristic and sharp colour in her voice. This album is beautiful, it's very melancholic, it's not going to cheer you up, it's not swinging, you can feel that ache, that pain, in songs such as 'Lonely House' and 'Brother, Where Are You?' You have to stay and listen to it. She's also a very strong lyricist and wrote so many poems. She has a strong perspective. It was so new to me when I first heard [it], especially in terms of the jazz voicing, how she phrases and pronounces the words. And sometimes she doesn't sound beautiful, but it doesn't matter. She expresses that blues, you can feel the sadness of this album.

Pharaoh Sanders
Karma
(Impulse!, 1969)

I listened to this when I first sat on a flight, it was my first time away from home [in] December 2015. I was heading to Munich to record my album. I started listening to this at the start of the flight. It was such a weird feeling for me to explore this kind of music for the first time, because I had never heard spiritual jazz, free jazz. This was the first introduction for me. And to listen in that environment, where I was completely lost. And it was so wild, the whole album is very wild, it's very expressive and very pure. There's some parts that he sings and the way that he sings is very similar to a Mongolian singing style. The [album's] whole expression has awoken so many expressions in myself.

THE CENTRE

Adarsuren P
Ardiin Duunii Adaraa
(Amartaivan Adarsuren / Hi-Fi Media Group, 2013)

Adarsuren is from the same countryside in Mongolia as my father was, and my father is a big fan of him. And actually, many Mongolians, especially labourers and very normal people, they know all Adarsuren's songs. He was a singer who made very old folk songs popular again. And my friends, my parents, my father, after working his hard job, would sing these songs and it would relieve the tiredness you know? So, these songs connect to a very core memory. Also, the accompaniment and how he sings, it's very, very simple. He sings like he's talking to you, in a very soft voice, nothing is too much. I didn't really listen to his music when I was little because I was mostly listening to like Billboard things, pop stuff and later jazz. But now I really appreciate it and I see how simple songs can be very powerful and bring joy to life. That is my current centre of how I want to make music.

INTERVIEW BY RUSS SLATER JOHNSON

Shirley Horn
Here's to Life
(Verve, 1992)

I was learning the song 'Just in Time' and searching for different versions and I found Shirley Horn accidentally on YouTube. The way she sang '*just in time, I found you just in time*,' was so slow, she has very unique phrasing. I immediately felt the warmth of her voice. Then I jumped into her music and enjoyed it very much but I stopped listening to her. Later when I moved to Munich I had a phase where I felt so alone, in 2018, 2019, and I listened to this album. The songs are amazing with beautiful arrangements, orchestration, strings. When I listened I felt like a wise woman was talking to me. She's such a strong storyteller and it's a very romantic album. At that time I needed that feeling from another woman.

Masako Ohta & Matthias Lindermayr
MMMMH
(Squama, 2022)

With this album you have to listen to it the whole way through. It's like a book, telling you the story and you cannot skip one of the chapters. It's very intimate. And yet it has so much space, you have time to imagine and interpret things in your imagination. The sound is like being on a cloud. It takes you to a very positive and dreamy place when you listen. It's very rare to find from one album a complete feeling, where the songs are all connected. And when you finish the album, then you have the feeling of 'I finished the book.' But you can always listen to it back and think again, 'what was the story? What was it trying to tell me?'

Hanne Kaunicnik

+ *Enji* *is playing Kings Place, London on May 19 as part of Songlines Encounters, as well as Manchester's Band on the Wall (May 20) and the Bristol Beacon (May 21)*

South Asian Joy

Revelatory qawwali, North Indian wonderment and frighteningly deep bass sitars were all in the offing as ***Simon Broughton*** *attended the Southbank Centre's festival of South Asian music*

I caught just one day of the excellent four-day *South Asian Sounds* festival (March 7-10) at the Southbank Centre, but among numerous artists was one of the best Sufi *qawwali* bands I have ever seen. Several members of Chahat Mahmood Ali Qawwal from Faisalabad have worked with Rahat Fateh Ali Khan and Faiz Ali Faiz, and it shows in the passion and fire of their delivery. Chahat Ali, who is only 20 years old, is a student of Rahat. They began with 'Allah Hoo' and closed with 'Dam Mast Qalandar', pretty standard choices, but the performances were thrilling. The good news is that they are based in Birmingham for 12 months, so there'll be more chances to hear them – including in Trafalgar Square on April 20 to celebrate Eid.

The vividly dressed folk singer Malini Awasthi performed songs from Varanasi and the Awadh region of North India, although we were also hoping to see Anwar Khan Manganiyar from Rajasthan whose visa didn't arrive in time. However, Aswathi was sublime, with a harmonium-like aura around her warm alto voice plus rhythmic punctuations on *tabla* and *dholak* as her hands expressively framed her face following the contour of her lyrics. She introduced her songs in Hindi, but I got feelings of longing, wonderment and ultimately joy.

The excellent Anglo-Bangladeshi group Khiyo, led by charismatic singer Sohini Alam, added a contemporary flavour and some folk rock. Meanwhile, in the Festival Hall was a rare *jugalbandi* duet of *sitar* and *surbahar* (bass sitar) with brothers Nishat and Irshad Khan. The two instruments involve a lot of jangling strings, particularly as Nishat seemed obsessed with strumming the sitar's high *chikari* strings which were pretty tiring on the ear. The surbahar isn't just low but seems to have centuries of history attached. It was like a vast bottom-feeding fish full of subaquatic mystery in the shadows.

Above: Malini Aswathi
Below: Chahat Mahmood Ali Qawwal

Nandi Desai

LES DISQUES DE DÉLICE

As part of our 25th anniversary celebrations we like to have the odd bumper prize bundle, and this issue is no different as we have 10 bundles courtesy of Les Disques Bongo Joe to give away. Each bundle contains three albums: Ndox Electrique's *Tëd ak Mame Coumba Lamba ak Mame Coumba Mbang* on CD, the Coco María compiled *Club Coco 2* on CD and a promo CD of *Merengue Tipico: Nueva Generacion!*

WIN

To win, tell us where the Ndox Electrique project was recorded (have a look at your December 2023, #193 issue for help!)

See p21 for competition rules

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TAKE NOTE

Marina Satti

Mateusz Dobrowolski checks in on the vocalist representing Greece at this year's *Eurovision Song Contest*

Yannis Kelemenis

It's summer 2017. Marina Satti's second single 'Mantissa' has become a radio hit in Greece and Bulgaria. Kelly Fanarioti of *HuffPost* is interviewing Marina in her birth town of Athens, where the track's already viral video was made. Fanarioti parrots the frequent request from Satti's fanbase that she appear on *Eurovision*: "For me, it is still the beginning of my career," she replies, "Of course, it can be done in the future only if I had the right team and we had something great to suggest." Fast forward to autumn 2023 and Greece's national broadcasting corporation ERT has decided to nominate Satti to perform at the forthcoming contest without any national competition held. Why is that not a surprise?

First: Marina's music. It's undoubtedly modern, but also based on a mix of regional traditions. Polyphonic singing from the Epirus region of north-west Greece, rural *shawm* (*zurna*)-adorned music of the Greece-Macedonia-Bulgaria-Turkey borderlands, influences from Crete (the island where she grew up) and *rebetiko*, the genre that blossomed following the 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey when displaced people – among them Marina's grandfather – joined poor urban populations in large Greek cities like Athens, Thessaloniki and Heraklion. During her live shows, Satti sings both Bulgarian polyphonic songs and songs in Arabic. With a Sudanese father and a Greek mother, Marina is the embodiment of the cultural exchange between Greece and the 'East'.

Satti's debut album *YENNA* (Birth), released in 2022, embraces postmodern Hellenism with a twist and delivers a wide range of musical ideas and emotions. One of the singles, 'Yiati Pouli M" (Why, My Bird), is Satti's take on the traditional Greek song, where she embraces different vocal harmonies to create a gloomy atmosphere perfectly suited for a song lamenting a bird with broken wings that can't sing like it used to. The video for this one was made in Istanbul and contains clashes of everyday life, whirling dervishes and an intriguing image of a group of local women, with Marina in the centre, and the Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque, a symbol of the city's Byzantine and Ottoman heritage, in the background. And that's just for starters, on the album there's punchy rap 'Spirto Ke Venzini' (Match and Gasoline), R&B-driven 'Pali' (Again) and 'Kritiko' with an impressive drill soundscape, that in concert Satti turns into a folk pageant dance with traditional flute. After the release of *YENNA*, Satti performed more than 40 shows all around Europe.

Satti's second speciality is her education and experience. Even before graduating from the Berklee College of Music in 2011, she had performed with Bobby McFerrin and become a graduate of advanced classical studies and jazz at the Athens Nakas Conservatory. In 2016 she founded Fonés (Voices), '*a female a capella group performing traditional polyphonic songs.*' She continued along this line when, in November 2023, she was the main voice in a performance for voice and orchestra by Kostas Giannidis at the Thessaloniki Concert Hall. Another story is her acting career, with performances in leading theatres and on Greek TV. Satti's higher education started at the National Technical University of Athens where she studied architecture, a subject she no doubt used to build her music career.

The final reason for her Eurovision nomination: Satti's image (exploring not only her heritage and the Greek ethos but also paradoxes of Western vs Balkan, philosophical yet wild), the tension between a humble attitude and the popstar status she has achieved. How often do you see a folk singer endorsing top brands, as she's regularly doing on Instagram? The title of Satti's *Eurovision* entry, 'ZARI', translates to 'Dice' and explores fate and luck. The *Eurovision* community should consider themselves quite lucky to finally meet her on May 7 in Malmö, Sweden.

Galestar Konexioa

An unlikely camaraderie between Welsh and Basque musicians is making its way to Wales

Galestar Konexioa at Atlantikaldia Festival

When imagining a region that would compare culturally to the Basque Country, Wales wouldn't perhaps be first on the list. Yet an exciting collaboration between artists in the two countries has shown that Wales could have even more in common with the Basque Country than its closest neighbours.

In 2021, Herri Arte Eskola (The Basque Folk Art School) students began a series of musical exchanges with similar music schools in Catalonia and Galicia, and after an encounter with Welsh folk singer Gwilym Bowen Rhys, the school decided that Wales would be next. So, in 2023, three Welsh folk artists made their way to the Basque Country to learn Basque traditions and teach Welsh music.

"Wales has more in common with the Basque Country than say with Ireland or Scotland in many ways," says Rhys, "It's got the same population, about the same proportion of that population who speak the native language, and the cultural pride that the language is the absolute 'all' of the culture, in a way."

Like Wales, the Basque Country's language is at the core of its cultural identity. Herri Arte Eskola celebrates Basque language and culture through a range of courses including music, visual arts, literature, spoken word and dance. The school is open to students of all ages but is attended mostly by young people keen to learn their culture's traditions. Students can learn traditional instruments such as the *txalaparta, alboka*, *dulzaina* and *trikitixa*, all of which feature in the school's Basque Folk Orchestra.

Galestar Konexioa, the 'Welsh Connection' project, began when dance artist Angharad Harrop (National Dance Company Wales) and fiddle player Patrick Rimes (Calan, VRï) were brought on board along with Gwilym to craft a performance set for the 57-strong Basque Folk Orchestra and dancers. Teachers and students helped develop the set by teaching their Welsh guests about Basque musical traditions.

"It was definitely a shock for us learning some of their rhythms… [Some] are more pan-Mediterranean or at least pan-Iberian, like *fandango*. It's so joyous," says Rhys. "There were points of familiarity with the dance tunes. We taught some of the standard *twmpath* and *ceilidh* dances, and a lot of those tunes are… in the same kind of sound world."

Students learnt Welsh dances, tunes and songs. Rhys taught them classic Welsh folk songs such as 'Lisa Lân'. They were struck by the melody's haunting modality, something that doesn't often appear in Basque music.

After months of rehearsals, they performed at Atlantikaldia Festival. Their show is a celebration of musical traditions, fusing Welsh and Basque tunes and dances, all backed by a full orchestra of Basque folk instruments. Familiar Welsh dance tunes are given a new life by the joyous rhythm of the txalaparta, and the Basque *jota* shares the stage with fierce *clocsio* dancing. It is a beautiful expression of kinship between cultures. *RHODRI MCDONAGH*

+ *Galestar Konexioa* *will appear at FOCUS Wales, Wrexham on May 11, and at Tredegar House Folk Festival, Newport on May 12*

AWARDS & ACCORD

Lankum and Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin win big and platform politics at Irish broadcaster RTÉ's 2024 folk awards

Tríona Ní Dhomhnaill performing at the awards

Paulo Goncalves

This year's RTÉ folk awards honoured a host of names familiar to *Songlines* readers. Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin, notably, won Best Original Folk Track for 'Anáil na hOíche' (Night-Breathing) as well as Best Folk Musician. Talking to *Songlines* about the former, he explained that the track is "a very personal kind of song to me," one that confronts a period of turmoil in his life. Perhaps fittingly, then, Ó Ceannabháin used his speech on winning Best Track to tell the audience, "While ordinary Irish people have taken to the streets in massive numbers to demand action and stop the genocide [in Gaza], we're not seeing an ounce of moral courage from the people in power."
The statement was met with much cheering and applause. On receiving his second award, he ended more light-heartedly declaring, "Bono is a pox!" The crowd, including a grinning President Michael D Higgins, whooped enthusiastically.

Other double winners of the night, Lankum, were similarly outspoken. On accepting Best Folk Group, the band's Daragh Lynch said, "On behalf of me and Ian [Lynch] and Radie [Peat] and Cormac [MacDiarmada, I need to] express full solidarity with the people of Palestine." This became a theme, with most artists declaring, in either Irish or English, support for Palestine in their speeches and performances. Lynch dedicated the award "to both sides of my family… who can't actually go to a social gathering without it descending into hours and hours of song. Fucking maniacs."
The group's second award was Best Folk Album for *False Lankum*. "We're already talking about making another," Lynch told *Songlines*.

The evening also saw Tríona Ní Dhomhnaill, *'one of Ireland's leading interpreters of folk and traditional music'* and member of The Bothy Band, honoured with a Lifetime Achievement award. Aoife Ní Bhriain was announced Best Folk Instrumentalist and proved it with a stirring performance on her fiddle. And Rhiannon Giddens, who now lives in Ireland and was another voice for the end of war, presented Best Folk Singer to Ó Ceannabháin and performed the optimistic 'Yet to Be' with her partner, Francesco Turrisi, and band supporting. Combining music, skill, politics and personhood, this year's RTÉ folk awards was a fitting reflection of what folk and traditional music is all about.

EMMA RYCROFT

SPOTLIGHT

Mexican Institute of Sound

Camilo Lara, by now a 'certified' Mexican institution, tells ***Celeste Cantor-Stephens*** about 20 years of going against the grain, upsetting scrap collectors and Disney-endorsed success

"If you close your eyes and listen, you can easily detect the noises [that come] from Mexico City," Camilo Lara tells me. He would know. As the person behind Mexican Institute of Sound – or *Instituto Mexicano del Sonido* – Lara's music is a fundamental part of the contemporary Mexican soundscape. Blending traditional Mexican folk with contemporary beats and electronics, MIS has also been subtly incorporating the sonic delights of Mexican streets for two decades. Today, Lara speaks to me from his studio in La Roma, a neighbourhood within a city defined by the loudspeaker cries of the scrap collector, the knife-sharpener's pan flute, and the hot *camotes* (sweet potato) cart, whose steam-powered whistle permeates the evening streets. Given all this, the MIS studio seems remarkably calm.

It hasn't always been this way. When Lara first moved to La Roma 20 years ago, it was a rough area, and still recovering from the 1985 earthquake. "When I moved to La Roma, they gave me the keys to my house," Lara remembers. "I went in to look, and when I came out the mirrors from my car had been stolen!" Today though, Lara says, "La Roma is Disneyland," increasingly gentrified, buzzing with tourists, and all the accompanying implications.

Lara's situation has changed, too. His studio is a relatively recent acquisition, having moved there from his home around five years ago. "It was pretty painful to have *mariachis* eating Cheetos in my bedroom," he laughs, painting a lively picture of the moment he realised he needed more space, as musicians smoked and snacked their way around his house. Lara was working on the soundtrack to Disney animation *Coco* at the time. The film,

with its music, was a critically-acclaimed success: one among many. Lara's 20-year career has involved further film, including *Black Panther*; production credits and collaborations with artists from Toots & the Maytals and Graham Coxon to Norah Jones; Grammy and Latin Grammy nominations; and, between a host of other accolades, six studio albums as MIS.

Responses to Lara's work have changed considerably. When he began DJing, the younger generations rejected the traditional Latin American sounds that Camilo brought to his sets, even when combined with contemporary Anglo music. "It was hard," he reiterates. "When I was playing *cumbia* no one liked cumbia, and they were like 'Oh, you're not cumbia, you're doing electronic music.' And the electronic guys were saying 'Oh, you're not doing electronic music, you're playing cumbia!' And the rock guys were like 'Oh no, you're not doing... you're doing shit!'" For a long time, incorporating Mexican genres was distinctly uncool, a sentiment Lara believes was rooted in classism: "Cumbia was 'for poor people', or mariachi was an 'old' thing, and *corridos* [narrative songs, often with a notorious protagonist] were a thing from the north, and for thieves." Thankfully, Camilo feels such views are finally being overturned by upcoming generations of Mexican musicians, building upon a DIY ethos, and a rejection of mass media. Acceptance and pride in Mexican music is ultimately what Lara has been fighting for, and perhaps reflects wider issues. Music is "the conscious and the inner thoughts of society," Lara muses. "I think it's just a companion to what is happening [elsewhere]." Lara is emphatic about music's ability to unify and create understanding across cultures. He recalls touring with foreign musicians, sharing no languages beyond music, and has declared that "the only democratic place on Earth right now is the dance floor."

Lara always wanted to be a musician, he tells me, depicting his five-year-old self, who would watch his guitarist brothers rehearsing in the family kitchen, complete with Robert Smith-inspired haircuts. "I wanted to be one of them, and be cool!" Deterred from the guitar by being left-handed, Lara embarked on a sample-based approach, borrowing sounds from the wider world. "I always wanted to be called a musician, and no one called me a musician! They were like 'oh this guy is a thief!' And now that people call me a musician, I'm like 'no, I'm not a musician, keep on calling me [a thief], it's better,'" he grins.

Lara should be careful what he wishes for! Recently, his gentle 'thievery' became the subject of a cease-and-desist letter from representatives of the CDMX scrap collectors. Their 'lyrics' – announcements usually broadcast via loudspeaker from a moving truck – were borrowed for MIS track 'Se Compran', a hypnotic piece of minimalist electronics and sweetly-delivered vocals, building to a final frenzy. The far-less-melodious scrap collector original is a kind of sonic equaliser, Lara confirms: "Night and day you hear it; it doesn't matter how rich you are or how poor you are, everywhere in the city!" This amplifies the legal blow: "I never expected that something that has been so annoying in my life [would] continue to be as annoying!"

"No one called me a musician! They were like 'this guy is a thief!' And now that people call me a musician, I'm like 'no... keep on calling me [a thief], it's better"

'Se Compran' is an apt example of the inimitable musicianship of MIS, drawing from the streets of CDMX, combining Latin American folk and contemporary Anglo-Western sounds, both embracing and defying tradition. New MIS compilation *Algo-Ritmo* rightly celebrates this 20-year mark, with music from MIS' life so far, plus two new tracks. One, 'Stop!', sees Lara joining long-time collaborator Ceci Bastida, of punk-rock band Tijuana No!, for a psychedelic *cumbión*. The second, 'Bolero', contrasts, with Bollywood-like samples and smooth pop vocals from Foudeqush and Esteman. The collection continues to offer tastes of almost-limitless genres and influences: from hip-hop to EDM, dub to soul, from cumbia and *bolero* to *guaracha* and mariachi. Digital approaches meet analogue sounds, synths and Lara's collection of *laboratory* toys. Whether dark and dense or light and dreamy, leaning into contemporary pop or nostalgic flavours of Mexico City-past, MIS feels ever-fresh, dynamic and fuelled by dance-inducing groove.

I ask Lara what he's most keen to promote in his work. "The *Denominación de Origen* [Appellation of Origin]: be a good wine," he declares. "Or, be a delicious mango from Brazil, but be that! I think that's what's exciting: to be something unique from where you are, beautiful, and you can't be copied or replicated!" "Be a good mango," we laugh, "that's a good mantra!" It's one that Camilo Lara is living out to perfection. ◆

+ ***Algo-Ritmo: Mexican Institute of Sound Hits 2004-2024*** *is out now on Soy Sauce and reviewed on p51. 'My American is Not Your America (feat Graham Coxon)' is on this issue's compilation, track 12*

Courtesy of Soy Sauce

WIN

We have an *Algo-Ritmo* vinyl to give away. To enter, tell us the name of the MIS song featuring the sound of Mexican scrap collectors.

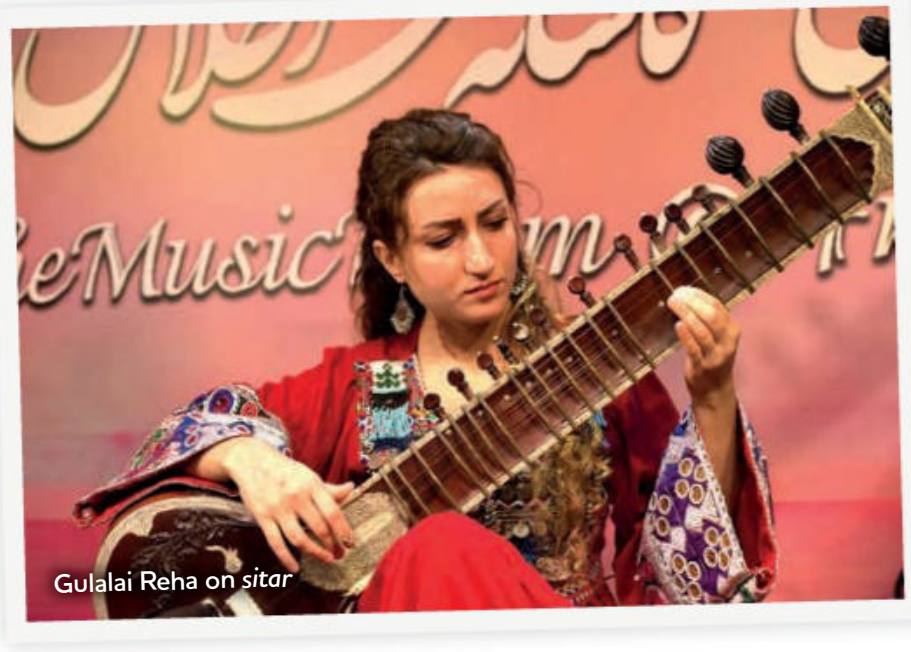
See p21 for competition rules

SIMON SAYS…

Encounters with the Afghan Youth Orchestra find **Simon Broughton** upbeat about the state of the region's traditional music

The Afghan Youth Orchestra made it for a South Asian Sounds concert at London's Southbank Centre plus dates in Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham by the skin of their teeth. Part of the Afghan National Institute of Music (ANIM), they are currently based in Braga, Portugal where they've been given asylum since 2021. Their UK visas were turned down just days before the concert. After spending seven months and over €12,000 on biometrics and visas for the tour, Jay Visvadeva, artistic director of Sama Arts UK, who organised the visit, called the Home Office decision "callous and inhumane." After a vigorous social media campaign, media stories and political pressure, the Home Office saw sense and overturned their decision several hours later. However, by that time the flights had been cancelled and fifty new flights had to be booked. "It was a totally unfair decision on the students and on the public who were keen to see them," Visvadeva says.

The night after their London concert, the Youth Orchestra were invited to Rahmat Simab's Music Room where they were richly fed and ANIM Director Dr Ahmad Sarmast was given an award "for his noble and historical work for the music of Afghanistan." Sarmast founded ANIM in Kabul in 2010 with teaching for both Western music and traditional Afghan music. Their female orchestra, Zohra, attracted particular attention. The ANIM students and teachers left Kabul following the Taliban takeover of August 2021 – when their premises were ransacked.



Gulalai Reha on *sitar*

At The Music Room in London there was a special concert featuring the traditional musicians of the orchestra. It began with *sitar* players Gulalai Reha and Shabana Gulistani with Emat Karimi, a fine *tabla* player who accompanied all the musicians. I talked to Reha (25) before the concert and she explained how she'd been drawn to Afghan and Indian classical music from an early age. Her parents were not keen, but she insisted and left her home in Gulistan (between Kandahar and Herat) for a hostel in Kabul so she could study sitar at the ANIM school. She was also a member of the Zohra orchestra. Her younger sister also went there to learn violin, but didn't admit it to her parents for a year. In Afghanistan, learning music needs extra determination and courage as well as the application required anywhere else. The two sitar players on stage were an inspiring sight. Reha was in a resplendent red dress with traditional Pashtun designs. There was also a quartet of *rubab* players and solo rubab from Ramiz Safar. With its muscular tone and filigree delicacy, the rubab is Afghanistan's signature instrument.

It was 284 members of ANIM that were given asylum in Portugal and accommodation was made available in Braga. But many members of the school chose to join family and friends in Germany or elsewhere. Ahmad Sarmast says they lost 30 to 40 percent of their students. However, the London concert was clearly a moving occasion and many Afghan music lovers said it was a sign of hope they hadn't seen for ages. Certainly the traditional music I saw at The Music Room gives cause for optimism while the situation is so grim in Afghanistan. ◆

Dr Ahmad Sarmast

Ashok Patel; Simon Broughton

Next Issue…

June 2024 (#198)
On sale May 10

We hear from exciting names in English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh folk music, including **Laura Cannell**, **Daisy Rickman**, **Landless**, **Malin Lewis**, **Goblin Band** and **Angharad Jenkins**. Guatemalan singer **Sara Curruchich** talks about taking her Indigenous culture to the world; we have **Ana Lua Caiano**, a new voice in Portuguese music, and **Sarāb**, uniting contemporary jazz with Middle Eastern traditions. Screenwriter **Frank Cottrell-Boyce** reveals the music that has shaped him for our *My World* interview, Finnish harmonica quartet **Sväng** get a *Beginner's Guide*, and we hear from Brazilian composer **Arthur Verocai** about his extraordinary 1972 debut album. Plus, our extensive **UK Festival Guide**.

Daisy Rickman

Dave Brown

FEEDBACK

Letters, shout-outs, comments, emails and everything in between

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Celebrating Past and Future

Congrats to the superb *Songlines* team for putting together an informative and action-packed issue [#195] that both pays tribute to the many fine artists who have graced its pages over the last 25 years as well as illuminating the next generation of sounds and voices (and perhaps the first issue to mention IPA?). Here's to another 25 years of discovering the world through music.
Mark Gorney, Berkeley, CA

No to the Negative!

Russ Slater Johnson in his editorial in issue 196 ponders whether *Songlines* should '*get rid of the negative review*,' adding that he would love to hear our thoughts on that.

My answer to this would be a resounding "No!" To me, it is far more important for the reviewer to offer an honest opinion, whether good or bad. A review is necessarily subjective, and most readers (and, I hope, artists) are aware enough to realize that they are simply reading one person's viewpoint.

What would be the point of pages of only positive reviews? Ultimately readers would be unable to form any kind of opinion based on the review, as they would not be sure that they could trust it. I appreciate that you would not wish to alienate any artists, but for me if a review is not honest then it is not worth the paper it is written on.
Shane Roberts, Bristol

We would never ask our reviewers to be dishonest, it was more a thought experiment: is there now enough music released each month to only review albums that we genuinely like? – Russ (ed)

Review Response

Re review of XOCÔ in #195 (p63):
I'm calling for greater cultural sensitivity and care when it comes to Afro Indigenous reviews, especially by white writers. We firmly feel this review revealed many misunderstandings.

These examples elaborate: It's not XOCÔ's first rodeo, as co-composer of top five hit song 'Girando Na Renda' in Brazil, [he is] not a newcomer to the music industry. We must also insist on accuracy regarding distinct musical styles and genres/subgenres in north-eastern Brazil. [XOCÔ] being compared to *forró* king, Luiz Gonzaga, is inaccurate when less than 1% of XOCÔ's album infuses that genre. Also problematic are descriptors [such as] '*shouty*' which give off an unconscious colonial tone especially when the former refers to ancient Afro traditional call-and-response. Overall we wish for this conversation to continue and request readers engage with XOCÔ's music: xocomusic.ca
Suzanne Roberts Smith

We aim to cover as much diverse global music as we can, and to do so with respect, so to hear we've made mistakes or caused upset is frustrating. We are learning and will do our best to make sure it doesn't happen again – Russ (ed)

READER PROFILE

DOM ALLUM, FARINGDON

WHEN DID YOU FIRST DISCOVER SONGLINES?
2020

WHAT'S ON YOUR STEREO?
Dorothy Ashby, Shay Hazan, Brandee Younger, Kamasi Washington, Cymande, Pharoahe Monch, The Magnetic Fields, Les Amazones d'Afrique, Joel Ross , The Coup, Scissor Sisters, Curtis Mayfield.

FAVOURITE ALBUMS?
Funkadelic – *Cosmic Slop*; Sly & The Family Stone – *There's a Riot Goin' On*; ANOHNI & the Johnsons – *I am A Bird Now*; K.O.G – *Zone 6, Agege*; Little Simz – *Sometimes I Might be Introvert;* Alice Clark – *Alice Clark*, Kokoroko – *Could We Be More*

FAVOURITE NEW ARTIST?
Mohamed Errebbaa

FAVOURITE GIGS?
Shabaka Hutchings at Hackney Church 2023. The only saxophonist who could do Coltrane justice, bidding farewell to the instrument.

WORST LIVE EXPERIENCE?
Spiritualized at Nottingham Royal Concert Hall 2022. A shoulder has never been so cold.

If you would like to be our next Reader Profile, please email us your answers and a picture to letters@songlines.co.uk

AT SHORT NOTICE

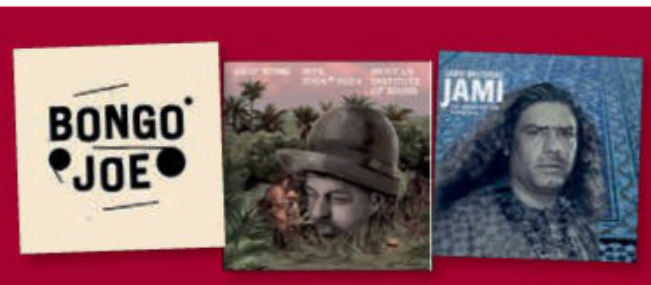
A lovely thing [*Essential 10* Greek Folk Albums] for the Greek diaspora from @SonglineMag – also bang in the middle for the name days of Marianna (any excuse for cake!) & all the Casianos' (& its variations), Paraskevas', Evdokia's
*From: @marianna_mic_*

Get yourself down to #Ipswich this summer for the @BTCipswich Festival – and catch amongst others @IbibioSound– a band, I am sure friends @SonglinesMag would approve of!
From: @julian_gibbs

Amazing what bargains are still out there – just added to the shelves – @SonglinesMag compilation with 20 page booklet & slip case – issued in 2005 'exclusively at' MVC (part of Woolies/Kingfisher who went bust in 2006). Great music from Mali, Guinea, SA... etc.
From: @TonyBurke2010

WIN

Les Disques Bongo Joe album bundle including *Merengue Tipico*, Ndox Electrique and *Club Coco 2* **14**
Vinyl of **Mexican Institute of Sound** compilation **18**
Vinyl reissue of **Sabri Brothers**' *JAMI* **68**



COMPETITIONS Submit your entry for each competition via the website: **songlines.co.uk/competitions**. Winners will be chosen at random.
Only one entry per household. No cash alternatives. If you would prefer not to be sent details of other *Songlines* products and services, or products from other carefully selected companies, please tick the relevant box on the entry form. Closing date for this issue's competitions (unless otherwise stated): May 24 2024

Zakaria Ibrahim

(1952-2024)

Founder of El Tanbura and icon of the Egyptian revolution

Zakaria Ibrahim, who founded the wonderful Egyptian band El Tanbura, has died of a heart attack. He was born in Port Said where his father worked on the Suez Canal. Ibrahim's first love was the plucked *simsimiyya*, the popular lyre of the canal region. There he saw '*how the simsimiyya was like a glue, bringing people together... and how it was critical to preserving values and cultural identity*.' He started El Tanbura (a loose collective of singers and musicians) in 1989 when he felt the instrument was declining due to the commercialisation of traditional music. And he '*collected more than 20 hours of traditional music and songs*.' He called the simsimiyya the keeper of "the spirit and identity of the people" and said, "The main aim for me was to revive this music in its home and make a relationship with the people who miss this music and want to hear it." Zakaria Ibrahim wrote songs for El Tanbura – named after a larger type of lyre also featured in the band – and sang in their weekly performances in Port Said. As well as the resistance songs of Port Said, their repertoire included songs about the simsimiyya and Sufi religious subjects.

Simon Broughton

As mentioned in our 2006 article on the group, El Tanbura '*played in Cairo in 1994, won financial support from the Ford Foundation and performed at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris in 1996*.' They performed live from Suez for the *BBC Today* programme in July 2006, had a showcase at WOMEX and did several UK tours. Their album *Between the Desert and the Sea* was a *Top of the World* in 2006 and *Friends of Bamboute* likewise in 2009. They also performed in Tahrir Square in 2011 during the Arab Spring.

Zakaria Ibrahim ran El Tanbura through the El Mastaba Center in Cairo as well as other Egyptian folk groups like Rango, featuring the pentatonic spiritual music from Sudanese communities and the Bedouin Jerry Can Band playing music from Sinai.

SIMON BROUGHTON

And farewell to...

Lead singer of Morgan Heritage, **PETER 'PEETAH' MORGAN** (1977-2024) has passed away. Morgan was the son of American-based Jamaican reggae artist Denroy Morgan, and together with seven of his siblings formed Morgan Heritage in 1994, though they would become best known as a five-piece. The group had considerable success throughout their career with albums like *Don't Haffi Dread* (1999), *Full Circle* (2005) and *Strictly Roots* (2015). Their last album, 2023's *The Homeland*, was a particularly global effort featuring collaborations with Mádé Kuti, Youssou N'Dour, Alpha Blondy and Rocky Dawuni... Ghanaian DJ and producer **DJ KATAPILA** (1973-2024) has died following a short illness. Katapila, whose real name was Ishmael Abbey, found international acclaim when Awesome Tapes from Africa released his album *Trotro* in 2016, a collection that highlighted his hybrid of Western house music with Ghanaian percussion and rhythms... The death of Bangladeshi singer, composer and educator **SADI MOHAMMAD** (1957-2024) has shocked many in Bengal. Mohammad died by suicide almost a year after the death of his mother, with many saying that he had been suffering from '*depression*' ever since. Mohammad was famous for his interpretations of Rabindra Sangeet (songs written by Bengali poet Tagore), as well as his patronage of the form – he was director of the cultural organization, Rabi Raag.

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FEMME FABRICANTS

Already an icon of the Tunisian revolution thanks to her protest songs, **EMEL**'s latest album sees her work with a completely female team to make one of the most unapologetically forthright and adventurous albums of the year. "I figured that if I don't insist on having female producers, I'll just end up working with another man," she tells ***Jane Cornwell***

Emel Mathlouthi (aka EMEL) never wanted to call herself a feminist. Then she realised that she'd been one all along. "I thought, hang on, it's not even a big deal. Women should be feminists by default, especially with everything that is going so wrong in the world right now. We need to flush these toxic patriarchal systems from everyone's bodies."

The Tunisian singer, composer and arranger has been making moves to do exactly that, both by challenging the norms of the male-dominated music industry and by writing protest songs that encourage a new way of being. Her guitar-led tune 'Ya Tounes Ya Meskina' (Poor Tunisia) and the formerly banned folk-hymnal 'Kelmti Horra' (My Word is Free) – which she sang to protestors on the Avenue Habib Bourguiba during Tunisia's Arab Spring protests in 2011, and again at the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo – contain the sort of hope that is strengthened by timing, and indeed, by musicality.

"After the 70s and 80s there was a void in protest music in the Arab world [because] of the presence of dictators," says EMEL, a mother-of-two who has been based in New York City since 2014. "So, by the 90s the young Arabs were definitely tamed. When I started singing even Joan Baez songs in my early 20s, people were like, 'How did you know about this? Where did you find your conscience?'"

"The problem is also that activist music is often a bit boring and simple," she continues, FaceTiming from her bed in a Berlin hotel room, a whistlestop after playing a gig outside the pyramids in Cairo, singing her full-throated songs while weaving a cat's cradle of rhythms on hand percussion.

"From the early days, I was just very interested in being totally free and singing in many different ways, boldly as well as subtly. It was never about just being beautiful or delivering nice melodies."

Welcome, then, to *MRA*, EMEL's frankly astounding fourth studio album. Pronounced 'Imra-a' (that's 'woman' in Tunisian Arabic), it's a project that was written, conceived and produced exclusively by and with women. A *miss-terwork* [sic] whose 12 electro-spiritual, electrifyingly danceable tracks are variously sung and/or rapped in languages including English, Arabic and French, and duly themed to raise awareness and combat transphobia and homophobia, sexism and racism.

Unapologetically mainstream – unapologetically everything – *MRA* pulses with elements of rock, funk and hip-hop; with Arabic reggaeton, African trap, Brazilian *batacuda* and banging dancefloor-tearing drum'n'bass beats. It's a portal to change, opened by dancing. "This record is about taking back control of our bodies, our lives, our narrative, our colour, our speech," declares EMEL. "As an Arab woman from Africa, I was never allowed to define myself on my terms. My multilayers were ignored. For the west, I had only two ways of existing: exotic or political."

'*I am a warrior, I am a witch, a superheroine,*' she sings, mellifluous and strident, on the anthemic 'Nar (feat Ami Yerewolo)'. '*I am a soldier, I am a fighter, a bullet…*' Watch her video for lead single 'Lose My Mind', a banger about fear and liberation lent smoky-voiced ballast by Swedish-Iraqi rapper Nayomi, and it's easy to believe her.

Clad in flowing red, her nails talon-like, her black plaits flailing, EMEL is an otherworldly force, a queenly apparition not unlike the great NYC multi-hyphenate artist/activist Diamanda Galás, an ancient-to-future vision bent on rallying like-minds, transcending boundaries, unleashing and enacting change.

This morning, however, she's getting her rest, midway through a tour that has taken in Abu Dhabi and the archaeology-rich Altındağ in Turkey. In March she played WOMADelaide in Australia, a very different artist from the guitar-strumming, laptop-and-violin-accompanied protest singer of her last visit in 2014.

Nevertheless, while *MRA* is buoyed by a team of underrepresented, overly-talented women, including Malian rapper Ami Yerewolo (on 'Nar'), Nigerian MC Eva Alordiah (on 'IDHA'), Brazilian DJ-producer Lyzza and Ukraine's 2024 Eurovision entry, alyona alyona, the musicians that are touring with her are male. It's not ideal, she says. But it is how it is: "Facts are facts. Men tend to hire men. It's hard to find female musicians who'll tour."

"But we don't have to be apologetic for wanting to support women and especially, to trust each other. I'm not interested in that inherited feeling where women are rivals anymore." Her eyes flash. "I want to change the system from within. I'll be doing a residency in May in Paris and we will have a female drummer, female sound engineer, lighting designer, tour manager, photographer, publicist, you name it."

> "I'm not interested in that inherited feeling where women are rivals anymore"

If she's angrier now – indeed, if all women are angrier now – it's because she's tired of waiting. Change was promised and didn't come; not really. "I keep thinking of that comment by Ruth Bader Ginsburg," says EMEL, namechecking the late associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

"She was asked when she thought there would be enough women on the Supreme Court. She replied, 'when there are nine of them [taking all nine seats],' and people were shocked. She said, but it's been men all these years and no one thinks that is extreme!"

A pause. "We're still labouring under this system that was created by men. 99% of the tracks on my albums" – *Ensen* (2017), the remix album *Ensenity* (2018), *Everywhere We Looked Was Burning* (2019) and *The Tunis Diaries* (2020) – "were done with male producers. People were always like, ah your music is so empowering, who produced it? I'd be like, er, well…"

"I figured that if I don't insist on having female producers, I'll just end up working with another man." When her previous record label "tried to push me to do things I didn't want to do," she duly set up her own label, Little Human. "I wanted to create a new accessible sound that would get the message out as widely as possible. I was listening to an extensive playlist of women DJs and reckoned some had to be producers. I rented a house in Normandy, France and invited a few of them along."

One of the first to arrive was Netherlands-based Brazilian DJ Lyzza, whose eagerness to experiment dovetailed with EMEL's art-pop aesthetic: "Lyzza is young and was eager to try anything: sampling old Tunisian and Algerian songs, or mixing north African rhythms with trap, hip-hop and electronic ▸

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MY WORD IS FREE
An EMEL Discography

Helma Dream
(Emel Mathlouthi, 2007)
Self-released CD of demos and live recordings, including many of the songs that she would become known for. On the album are 'Kelmti Horra' and 'Naci en Palestina', an adaptation of the Spanish-language 'Naci en Alamo' to pay homage to Palestinians and their struggle.

Kelmti Horra
(World Village, 2012)
With stunning versions of 'Kelmti Horra', 'Ma Lkit' and 'Dhalem', it's a fine studio debut with an extended palette: *chanson*-esque chamber strings alongside *bendir* and *daf* drums, moving choirs and dashes of electronics. The 2022 reissue comes with her emotional live rendition of 'Kelmti Horra' from the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize Concert.

Ensen
(Partisan Records, 2017)
A clear move away from protest songs as EMEL begins to defy easy categorisation and create a pan-global sound. She worked closely with fellow Tunisian Amine Metani to create a beat-driven, yet Middle Eastern sound bed. It remains her rawest album.

Everywhere We Looked Was Burning
(Partisan Records, 2019)
An astonishing concept album around the end of the world. Informed by climate change, there's lavish orchestration and punchy production as she looks at the past, present and future of life on Earth. Written after she moved to New York, it's her first album mainly in English.

The Tunis Diaries
(Partisan Records, 2020)
Quarantined in her childhood home in Tunis during lockdown EMEL armed herself with a laptop, tape recorder and guitar and recorded this intimate set of reworkings of old songs on side one and a surprising set of covers on side two, including versions of songs by Nirvana, David Bowie, The Cranberries and Placebo.

music. She got me to sing faster, to divide my Arabic flow. I had fun playing around with the music of my culture."

EMEL grew up in Tunis, the daughter of an academic Marxist father who was "imprisoned for his opinions" during the 1990s regime of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, then fired from his job ('IDHA', a dramatic song about the world's lack of empathy, is dedicated to him). She read Arabic literature alongside books by Dickens, Dostoevsky and Mark Twain, and listened to a vinyl collection that favoured classical music and Tunisian-Jewish music from between 1900-1950 ("When people were really free: Habiba Msika had her own car before she was shot by her male lover; Louisa Tounsia had a song called 'Empowering Women'").

Her mother, an elementary school teacher, instilled a drive, a wish for self-betterment, in the young EMEL that – in tandem with a preternatural ability for singing, acting and songwriting – would stand her in good stead. She went on to front a heavy metal band called Idiom while ("sort of") studying engineering at university: "I love the lyricism, drama and intensity of metal and its correlations with classical music. Just listen to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*! It's got a total metal feel."

> "I love the lyricism, drama and intensity of metal and its correlations with classical music"

She says she came late to Arabic music, which she'd previously associated with clichés involving "the diva standing on stage who just has to sing beautifully and follow the rules set by the men who compose for her. I had been searching for something more freeing, which was why metal spoke to me. For years I was proud of being the only woman wherever I went." She sighs. "The conditioning was bad."

One day a bandmate played her Joan Baez' version of 'The Boxer', and her world tilted. She began writing protest songs, including the aforementioned viral hit 'Kelmti Horra', written with Tunisian poet Amine Al Ghozzi, who provided the lyrics. With these new songs she was mindful that a) she was being monitored, b) opportunities were limited and c) the songs' sentiments had seen them banned on Tunisian TV and radio. In 2007 she slipped out of the country for a new life in France. She was on tour in Tunisia for the brief blooming of 2010's Arab Spring: "I took the mic onstage and said, 'we have to support these people because they are just asking for work and dignity.'"

"Being in France empowered me for sure," she says. "But it wasn't until I got to New York that I really started trusting myself as a producer, an artistic director. New York gives you wings; there's no end to what you can try and experiment with there. I love that you mention Diamanda Galás," she continues, "because I'm not the gentle pretty little thing that comes on and does the exotic Arabic belly-dancing."

"I've always felt that I had to win people's respect through my music. And with *MRA* I've created a sisterhood through banger music that will bring healing to everyone and break the cycle of male domination in a fun, non-negative way."

She flashes a grin. "It's a new cool universe." ◆

Ryan Murad, Amber Grey

***+ MRA** is reviewed this issue, p63. 'Souty' is on this issue's compilation, track 11. **EMEL** will perform at The Jazz Cafe, London on May 21*

Middle Eastern Frequencies

The vibrant experimental music scenes across the MENA region continue to inspire and innovate on their own terms, despite the instability around them. ***Oli Warwick*** finds out more

Even in the virtual, interconnected present, independent music responds innately to its surroundings. In the case of experimental sounds hailing from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the escalating conflict in Gaza and wider regional instability are taking their toll on artists, promoters and cultural figures of all kinds.

"It's not a very inspiring and comfortable situation now," says Sharif Sehnaoui, taking a drag on his cigarette on the balcony of his Beirut apartment. "We're not under fire ourselves, but I can tell you the feeling of everybody is complete and utter disgust. It pulls you down."

Since the 90s, Sehnaoui has been part of the vaunted Beirut alternative music scene – a hotbed of noise rock, electronics and free improv which found a footing via Ziad Nawfal's show on Radio Lebanon, leading to the formation of record labels like Ruptured and Al Maslakh, the Tunefork Studio run by musician and producer Fadi Tabbal, and the Irtijal festival, which Sehnaoui and Mazen Kerbaj founded in 2000. Despite the increasingly uncertain outlook, the 2024 edition of Irtijal is going ahead.

"We're taking the least possible risks in terms of people travelling in because we have the distinct possibility we'll need to cancel and re-book," Sehnaoui explains. "We need to warn all foreign guests, 'Hey, this is the situation here.'"

Whether digging into Sehnaoui's recorded work in projects like "A" Trio and Calamita, or discovering the scores of Ruptured releases with Tabbal's name on the credits, it's immediately apparent how mature, varied and assured the city's music scene is, spanning alt-rock, avant-garde electronics and leftfield beats through to drone, noise and free improvisation. It's a prolific scene which springboarded from breakthrough 90s groups like Scrambled Eggs and Soap Kills to Nawfal's *Ruptured Sessions* broadcasts – a Lebanese equivalent of the *Peel Sessions* – to nurture a swelling, inspired community of alternative musicians.

"Not to pat ourselves on the back or anything, but just to say we've been

L-R: Nadah el Shazly performing at Irtijal; Stellar Banger at Irtijal; Sharif Sehnaoui performing with Calamita at arts venue Beirut Open Space

really going hard since 2010," explains Nawfal. "There is no specificity to the Beirut scene in sound at all," Sehnaoui points out, "and I think that *is* the specificity. Lebanon is a mishmash of cultures, languages and identities, all coexisting. The particularity of the Lebanese music scene is the ability for it to be diverse."

"As well as the experimental scene, there's a totally different music scene in Beirut that is extremely Arabic focused," explains Mayssa Jallad, whose own Ruptured release, *Marjaa: The Battle of the Hotels*, blends ambient synth, *oud* and percussion with Arabic lyrics exploring a lingering legacy of the Lebanese civil war. "Finally, these two scenes are melting into each other in Beirut, and it's creating incredible new experimental bands like SANAM."

Beirut's music scene may be flourishing despite tumultuous years of economic collapse, COVID-19, the port explosion of 2020 and the fuel crisis, but Lebanon is not an island and across the Arab world inspiring experimental music scenes are incubating in various states and sizes. Just as cultures intertwine within Lebanon, there are connections to explore amid the distinct cities of the MENA region with their own unique cultural and political situations.

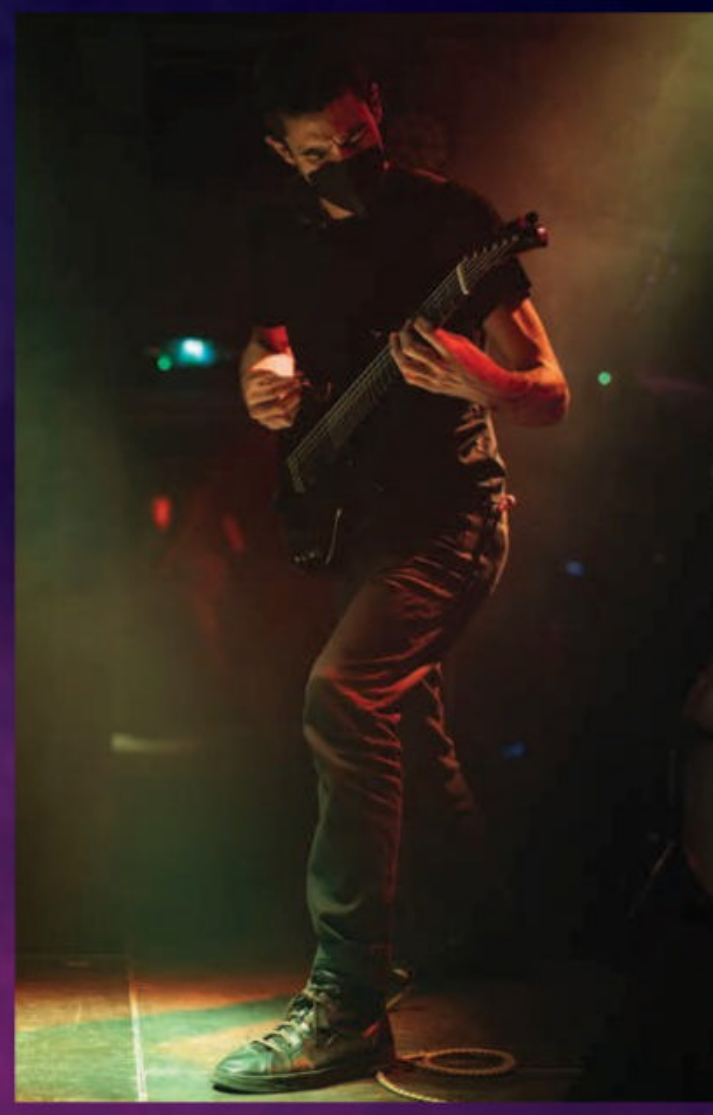
In recent years Cairo has become a hotbed of high-impact, wildly inventive electronic music which was nurtured during a golden patch for the Egyptian capital, orbiting the VENT venue and Epic 101 Studios. "I took a crash course in Ableton Live at Epic 101 Studios," explains Cairo-born singer, producer and dedicated experimenter Aya Metwalli. "The nice thing was it was not your typical DJ-going-to-learn-production kind of course. They showed me what I can experiment with in terms of effects and vocal processing," as evidenced by her 2016 EP *BEITAK* and her more recent collaboration with Sehnaoui's improv rock trio Calamita.

3Phaz, one of the founders of Epic 101 Studios, nods to the post-revolution era between 2012 and 2015 as a particularly strong time for experimental music in Cairo, but he and Metwalli both suggest the lack of significant social change eventually demotivated people to maintain such initiatives. Tuesday nights at Cairo Jazz Club are considered one of the few reliable bastions for the city's experimental music scene at present.

These days, 3Phaz is focused on developing his musical practice, which now ranks him among the most interesting producers working in leftfield club music in the city. Although his sound initially took cues from Egypt-specific electro styles like *mahraganat* and *chaabi*, captured on the 2020 album *Three Phase*, he's since consciously moved into less geographically defined zones of exploration.

"I got a bit scared, because I felt like I'd been pigeonholed into this mahraganat-referencing musician," he explains. "I don't want this to be my identity. You don't see someone from Germany, for example, being labelled as making 'German electronic music,' but if you're from Egypt or from somewhere else, there's this sense of having to exoticise this person and attaching the region to what they're doing."

3Phaz' attitude draws interesting parallels with Lyon-based, Tunis-rooted label Shouka, which similarly fuses modernist club production with a geographically ambiguous sound palette. The label was founded by Amine Metani, who also performs as Mettani and helms the Arabstazy collective [he's also regularly collaborated with EMEL]; artists on Shouka often make a point of embracing Tunisian culture in their source material, but they refuse to be limited or categorised by their heritage. The liner notes for the 2018 Arabstazy compilation, *Under Frustration (Volume One)*, are instructive: '*This musical journey stands for the diversity of this scene, and deconstructs the occidental perception that sees the Arab World as a culturally united and homogeneous entity. It is a manifesto for a burgeoning movement that is aware of its* ▸



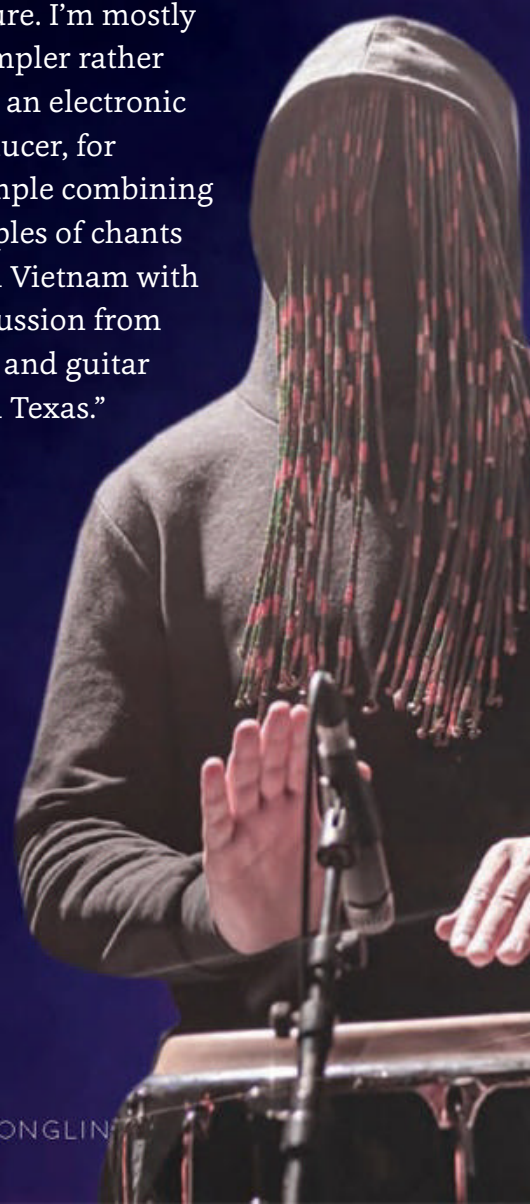
Sama Beydoun, Sandra Fayad, Youssef Naim

Top Right: Faddi Tabbal and Anthony Sahyoun perform at Lebanon's Onomatopoeia music venue (aka Ono Hub) Bottom Right: the Arabstazy Collective live

representations, immersing its roots into the future while highlighting and transmuting its traditions.'

Standout Shouka artist Amine Nouri, aka Nuri, channels his own background in drumming into dynamic percussive workouts that omnivorously draw on a broad sweep of dance music styles. His debut album *Drup* sounds distinctly non-Western, which an untrained ear might lazily presume to mean it's Tunisian music, but like 3Phaz, Nuri refuses to be restrained by where he comes from.

"For my music style, I don't limit myself only to the MENA region, but to the worldwide audience," Nuri says. "I don't identify myself with one specific culture. I'm mostly a sampler rather than an electronic producer, for example combining samples of chants from Vietnam with percussion from Mali and guitar from Texas."



If club music from the Arabstazy collective, 3Phaz and similarly spirited artists showcases a distinct approach, it stands in opposition to the conventional Western strains of house and techno which have long resided comfortably in more mainstream clubs across the MENA region. The artists, label managers and promoters seeking something more unique are often trying to build experimental music scenes from nothing. That seems to be especially true of the Jordanian capital, Amman. Compared to the vibrant, deep-rooted music community in Beirut, or Cairo's legacy of artistry, Amman has struggled to engender the sense of community necessary to cultivate a tangible scene.

"When you go to Lebanon and you meet Lebanese people, you find out they love their communities, they love their scenes and what they're a part of," says Abdallah Taher, aka Shusmo, a central figure in Amman's alternative music scene. "I'm not saying people don't like Jordan, but Jordan is just such a weird place because of its history, because of the politics, because of its socio-economic history as well. And all of this plays into this massive disconnect that we feel when we're trying to create a community."

Taher has been actively putting on events and DJing in Amman for a long time, but he speaks with enthusiasm about a more recent endeavour that signalled a positive development in the city. In 2022, MNFA opened, a performance space two storeys deep in an unused car park. It offered a nexus to an emergent wave of non-conformist Jordanian artists such as Big Murk, Toumba and 1800s Internet.

"Amer Manaseer and Abdallah Dabbas took it upon themselves to open a venue that would involve as many people from the community as possible," Taher explains. "They were doing a great job, but then they shut down for two months because they were kind of burnt out, and then October 7 [the attack by Hamas on Israel in 2023] happened. Till this day, they haven't found the headspace to reopen and do the nights, because people are not in the mood to go out and party. It feels kind of insensitive."

At the other end of the Amman underground sits Drowned By Locals, a proudly contrarian label run by Laith Demashqieh, Shereen Amarin, Firas Shahrour and Omar Amarin. They frame their mission with the example of the *su'luk*, an early Arabian social figure forced out of their tribe who lived on the fringes of society, often becoming a renowned poet. "We created Drowned By Locals in a way to escape Jordan," says Shereen Amarin, "to create our own little place inside of Jordan."

After an initial run of events, Drowned By Locals evolved into a label that explicitly rejected statehood in favour of meaningful connection with kindred wayward spirits in the virtual realm. Among the link-ups with outsider artists in the UK, Italy and Indonesia, Demashqieh also nurtures his own absurd, sonically compelling mutations of Arabic culture under

Clockwise from top left: the Arabstazy Collective live; Drowned By Locals' (L-R) Omar Amarin, Shereen Amarin, Laith Demashqieh and Firas Shahrour; Nuri Jérémy Jéhanin, Maude Fourgeot, Yassaman Rostamian

Clockwise from top left: Maryam Sirvan; Sirvan and Milad Bagheri performing as NUM; Siavash Amini

names like Al-Mutreb Abul-Loul and Ja7eem Hafeth. "I have side projects where I call myself blasphemous things," he explains. "It's dangerous, and the only hope for us is that Jordanians don't know much about us."

If the stakes feel high for controversial expression in Jordan, they're even higher in Tehran. In the Iranian capital, there was a moment around 2017 when optimism crept into a burgeoning scene of noise and avant-garde electronic music orbiting galleries and black box theatre spaces. In the past six years however, the fallout from the collapse of the US-Iran nuclear deal meant a crashing economy and a rise in hard-line, right-wing factions in the government.

Siavash Amini was involved in the SET music festival, which was aiming to foster a scene and connect with international audiences in the mid-2010s, all the while developing his own musical practice. His 2014 album, *Till Human Voices Wake Us*, established him as a leading light in Iranian electronic music alongside similarly spirited peers such as Ata Ebtekar (aka Sote). Amini's approach varies from release to release, but it's steeped in an academic look at the region's history of classical music and a natural inclination to noise and drone which tracks with the wider affinity for sonic abrasion across the Middle East.

Speaking over a VPN connection, Amini describes a younger generation creating a different sort of underground in contemporary Tehran centred around very intimate, jazz-oriented jam sessions. When he talks about the darker, more intense experimental electronic music community he was engaged with, he laments the loss of what they were developing, but also points to the fact a lot of people left the country. "I'm very sad about the situation here," he admits. "It's incredibly depressing. But I think anyone who can escape the situation, I understand when they do."

Maryam Sirvan is one such person, who, with her partner Milad Bagheri, formed NUM as a trip-hop project in 2010 in the Iranian town of Rasht, before heading into increasingly experimental sonic realms. It's forbidden for women to sing in public in Iran, among other restrictions, so for Sirvan, staying was not an option. Moving to Georgia, and then Canada, afforded her space to develop her music in a way which was simply impossible in Iran. Her 2021 album, *Feast on My Body*, is a fierce, unnerving work which hinges on distorted vocals and impressionistic noise.

"My life is woven with anger and anxiety… obviously caused mostly by the situation I have been facing in Iran for most of my life," Sirvan explains in no uncertain terms. "I have been trying to translate those feelings into sound – structured and layered noise has been one of the main tools for me to achieve this goal. I try not to let the chaos in, but to interpret it into sound instead."

Inevitably, chaos forms something of a backdrop which binds together these distinct music scenes. Political and societal upheaval is woven into the region through a myriad of historical threads – not least the looming shadow of Western colonialism. Noise, or indeed its ambient antidote, forms an urgent sonic impetus whether it's found in the churning, grinding overtones coming from Tunefork Studios in Beirut, crackling on the surface of pristine productions from Cairo and Tunis or accenting the heavily swung percussion of Palestinian pioneer Muqata'a.

"There's a sense of bipolarism, of noise versus calm… in almost everybody's tracks," says Fadi Tabbal. He's referring directly to the Beirut music scene, but the message feels applicable on a wider regional level. "There's never a moment in Beirut, or even in Lebanon, where it's calm. Calm does not exist. You have noise all over town and it kind of becomes your musical home. I mix these noises with a certain imagination, rearrange them and create escapism. I build these ambient works based on a lot of dissonance and sonic intensity, turning what is heavy and offensive during my days into a sort of shelter." ◆

+ *'Yiri' by Nuri is on our compilation, track 13*

SONGLINES MUSIC AWARDS 2024

The Winners

It's time to reveal the winners of the 16th *Songlines Music Awards*. From Best Artist and Best Group, both chosen by our readers, to our regional categories picking out the best albums from around the world, and Best Newcomer, our accolade for a seismic debut, all chosen by our music critics, it's been another stellar year of music-making. These awards are for albums released in 2023 that featured in issues published between March 2023 (#185) and January/February 2024 (#194) – they deal with issues of resistance, home, unity, friendship and love, not to mention their displays of fine musicianship. As is our custom, we will be giving out our award for World Pioneer later in the year.

WORDS BY **SIMON BROUGHTON, JANE CORNWELL, EMMA RYCROFT, CHRIS WHEATLEY** AND **NIGEL WILLIAMSON**

THE SONGLINES MUSIC AWARDS 2024 PLAYLIST

Featuring tracks from all shortlisted albums, the Songlines Music Awards 2024 playlist is now available to listen to on the Songlines Apple Music curator page and also on Spotify. To listen, scan the QR code on the left or visit: bit.ly/SonglinesMusicAwards2024

BEST ARTIST (Chosen by public vote)

WINNER

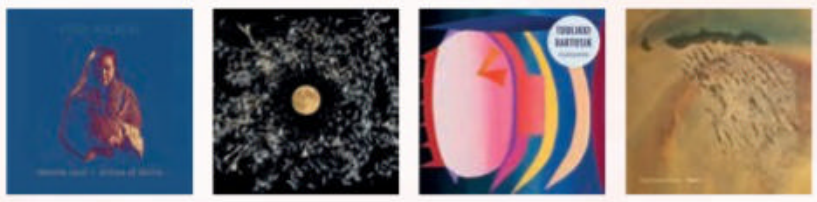
BADIÂA BOUHRIZI

***KahruMusiqa* (Akuphone)**

An album for the people, voted for by the people: *KahruMusiqa* by Tunisian singer-songwriter and composer Badiâa Bouhrizi, also known by her stage name Neysatu, is a collection of 12 mainly *fushá* (standard Arabic) songs written between 2004 and 2011 and recorded in Tunis, London, Paris and Montréal – each pulsing with compositional smarts and message-driven intention. Having grown up near Tunis singing in choirs and performing such classical Arabic musical styles as *muwashshahat* and *ma'luf*, Bouhrizi became a fixture of a music scene driven underground by oppression and repression. She fronted a heavy rock band, Black Angels, while still a teenager, and attended a Paris music conservatoire before resuming her place in a clandestine subculture where electronic beats were vehicles for activism as well as partying.

"In North Africa we express our pain through repetition and trance, exhorting the spirits of suffering… through music and movement," says Bouhrizi, who discovered the liberating power of computer software via an early 00s encounter with Beirut producer Zeid Hamdan, and crafted electronic compositions that blended the two aesthetics. USBs containing Bouhrizi's lo-fi works – also influenced by reggae, jazz, funk, neo-soul and Amazigh culture – were duplicated and passed around like contraband.

Tunisians gave Bouhrizi the title 'Miltazema' (Committed), a moniker granted to those committed to peace and justice. Her songs dovetailed with the collective mood: the beautiful, guitar-led 'Labess' became a live favourite during Tunisia's short-lived Arab Spring, with Bouhrizi singing it at the 2011 *Africa Celebrates Democracy* concert in Tunis. 'Bledi', a tribute to her homeland, finds her sweet melisma belied by a lurching electro-creep, a sense of danger. 'Manifesto' tells of her rapper brother's incarceration for his socio-political views. The award-winning 'Ila Salma' is dedicated to Palestinian resistance poet Fadwa Tuqan. An album to make you think as well as dance. Let this award spread the word. *JANE CORNWELL*



SHORTLISTED

Mari Kalkun – *Stories of Stonia* (Real World Records)
Lisa O'Neill – *All of This is Chance* (Rough Trade)
Tuulikki Bartosik – *Playscapes* (Efni Records)
Catriona Price – *Hert* (Orange Feather Records)

BEST GROUP (Chosen by public vote)

WINNER

MOSTAR SEVDAH REUNION

***Lady Sings the Balkan Blues* (Snail Records)**

Bosnian *sevdah* band Mostar Sevdah Reunion released their debut album in 1999, so are celebrating their 25th anniversary this year. They're important not just as one of the leading bands performing the distinctive Bosnian blues, but as the band that kick-started what's become a significant sevdah revival. They formed, quite remarkably, out of the ruins of the Bosnian war and the divided city of Mostar – where peace is still uneasy to this day.

Over the years they've worked with Balkan legends like Šaban Bajramović, Esma Redžepova, Ljiljana Buttler and their original vocalist Ilijaz Delić, and also helped launch the wonderful Amira Medunjanin. Their current vocalist is Antonija Batinić, and her *'stunning vocal style,'* according to the *Top of the World* review of their last album, *Lady Sings the Balkan Blues*, *'blends traditional Oriental melismatic singing with a kind of rockier, groovier sensibility.'*

MSR have shown that Bosnian sevdah is not only popular throughout the Balkans, but in the wider world as well. Yet it remains very much a product of the Turkish and Islamic histories that are such distinctive parts of Bosnian culture. The current band – with just a couple of the original members – have a slightly more jazzy flavour with the piano of Gabrijel Prusina, although the violin of Ivan Radoja adds an earthy lyrical intensity. Recorded in Mostar's Pavarotti Music Centre, tracks like 'Mene Majka Jednu Ima', 'Srdo Moja' and the perennial 'Moj Dilbere' have a beautifully dark confessional quality. *SIMON BROUGHTON*

SHORTLISTED

Tamsin Elliott & Tarek Elazhary – *So Far We Have Come* (Penny Fiddle Records)
Tinariwen – *Amatssou* (Wedge)
Orkestra Shkodra – *Like Nightingales in the Spring* (Oda 3)
Samaïa – *Traversées* (Samaïa)

AFRICA & MIDDLE EAST

WINNER

ALOGTE OHO & HIS SOUNDS OF JOY

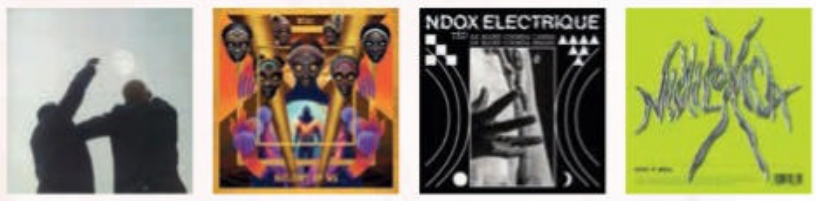
O Yinne (Philophon)

M Weissenfeldt

Alogte Oho was a struggling singer attempting to make his name among the Frafra people of northern Ghana when he was knocked off his motorbike and was fortunate to escape with his life. During the month he spent recuperating in hospital, he wrote the song 'Mam Yinne Wa' (God, You Love Me So) to thank his maker for his survival.

Once recovered, he recorded the song, which became a local hit, which is how the producer Max Weissenfeldt of German funksters The Poets of Rhythm heard it in 2014 when he stepped off a bus in the Frafra market town of Bolgatanga. Impressed by Alogte's voice as 'Mam Yinne Wa' blared out of speakers all over town, he tracked down the singer and re-recorded the song for international release as a 7" on his Philophon label. Further singles followed and in 2019 an album, also titled *Mam Yinne Wa*. A rich highlife and gospel mix, it led to a WOMEX showcase and European tour.

In 2023 came a second album *O Yinne!*, recorded mainly in Weissenfeldt's studio in Kumasi, the former capital of the Ashanti kingdom deep in the tropical rainforest. Backed by Alogte's female backing choir the Sounds of Joy, featuring Lizzy Amaliyenga, Patricia Adongo and Florence Adooni, it's a joyous Afro-futuristic fusion of rolling traditional highlife rhythms with a thrillingly contemporary electric slant and dashes of Afrobeat, reggae and Ethiopian pentatonics, bolstered by the Finnish musician Jimi Tenor on saxophone and flute. NIGEL WILLIAMSON



SHORTLISTED

Balimaya Project – *When the Dust Settles* (New Soil / Jazz re:freshed)
BCUC – *Millions of Us* (On the Corner)
Ndox Electrique – *Tëd ak Mame Coumba Lamba ak Mame Coumba Mbang* (Les Disques Bongo Joe)
Nihiloxica – *Source of Denial* (Crammed Discs)

AMERICAS

WINNER

LUZMILA CARPIO

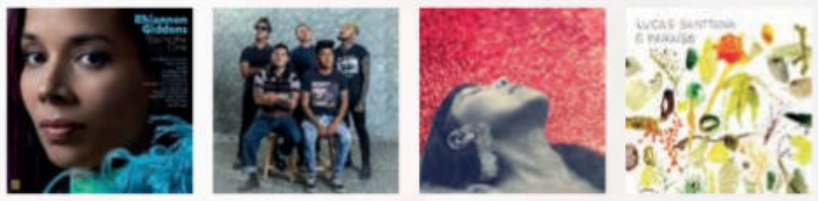
Inti Watana: El Retorno del Sol (ZZK Records)

Nora Lezano

At rare times, an album, an artist and a history combine to produce something very special. So it is here with *Inti Watana: El Retorno del Sol* by the Bolivian singer, songwriter and activist Luzmila Carpio: a sublime work which manages the almost impossible trick of sounding at once traditional yet thoroughly up-to-date, thrillingly experimental but effortlessly captivating. A concept album centred on the idea of spiritual communion with nature, the record feels (and sounds) like the ultimate expression of its maker's life.

Born in the small town of Qala Qala, in the Department of Oruro, west of Bolivia, in 1949, from an early age Carpio found herself butting heads with an establishment which stigmatised the culture of the country's Indigenous people. It was a time when Spanish-language music was dominant, urban living was promoted as the progressive way of life, and deep-rooted misogyny permeated society. Carpio took the brave step of challenging the status quo on all three fronts, succeeding in establishing herself as a renowned solo female artist. Eschewing the popular songs of the day, she turned away from urban hipness to embrace her native ancestry, composing folk numbers and children's songs in the Quechuan language. She was appointed as an official ambassador to France for Bolivia between 2006 and 2010.

All her adult life, Carpio has devoted herself to championing the rights of women, Indigenous people and the land itself. *Inti Watana: El Retorno del Sol* stands as a beautiful testament to her work. CHRIS WHEATLEY



SHORTLISTED

Rhiannon Giddens – *You're the One* (Nonesuch)
Son Rompe Pera – *Chimborazo* (AYA Records)
Soema Montenegro – *Círculo Radiante* (Mais Um)
Lucas Santtana – *O Paraíso* (NØ FØRMAT!)

EUROPE

WINNER
LANKUM

***False Lankum* (Rough Trade Records)**

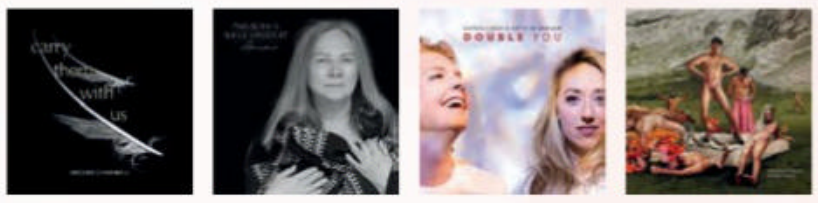
Sorcha Frances Ryder

It's predictable, we know. But, in all its doom-laden glory, *False Lankum* deserves the mass attention it continues to receive.

Not least for the concerned, depressed existentialism that it so powerfully captures. Radie Peat's startling, thin and forceful voice opening on 'Go Dig My Grave' tells the tale of a woman asking to be cared for in death as she wasn't in life. And the near-13-minute epic, 'The Turn', closes, with Daragh Lynch, Ian Lynch, Cormac MacDiamarda and Peat in tight vocal harmony, half-pleading, half-asserting, '*We'll find better days.*'

But part and parcel of *False Lankum*'s darkness is a plain love – for people and for music alike. In 'On a Monday Morning', a lament for the start of the work week, Ian Lynch sings, '*My lover is warm and her heart is mellow,*' a desperate sigh, then simply, '*I'd trade you the world just to share her pillow... on a Monday morning.*' 'Master Crowley's' is a jig that uplifts and breathes. Bathed in low drones, the melody seems to dance playfully around the corners of an abandoned building, in and out of hearing between industrial bangs, in an expression of Lankum's own exploration.

In all of this, *False Lankum* takes its time. There is no rushing through. 'Clear Away in the Morning' begins with 40 seconds of dissonant reverb and 'Fugue I', 'II' and 'III' provide bridges between the album's four sections, forcing one to sit, to savour the music, the sounds, the senses as they should be savoured. EMMA RYCROFT



SHORTLISTED

Brìghde Chaimbeul – *Carry Them With Us* (Glitterbeat Records)
Mari Boine & Bugge Wesseltoft – *Amame* (Norse)
Catrin Finch & Aoife Ní Bhriain – *Double You* (bendigedig)
Rodrigo Cuevas – *Manual de Romería* (Sony Music)

ASIA & PACIFIC

WINNER
YUNGCHEN LHAMO

***One Drop of Kindness* (Real World Records)**

Dayong Zhao

More than anything else – more than her music, a trad-modern mix of sung prayers and Western and Eastern instrumentation, or her voice, whose long, sustained notes are known to bring birds to roost in trees, the Tibetan singer Yungchen Lhamo is driven by a wish for universal compassion. By the need to transmit the conviction that together we can make a difference, just by tweaking our attitudes. Her album, *One Drop of Kindness,* is testament to a philosophy this serene, otherworldly figure embodies as a lifestyle.

"Just one act of kindness can change a life," says Lhamo, who in 1989 fled Chinese-occupied Tibet on foot for Dharamsala. She relocated to Sydney, Australia, where her debut *Tibetan Prayer* won an ARIA, catching the attention of UK-based Real World Records. 1996's *Tibet, Tibet* opened with 'Om Mani Padme Hung', Tibetan Buddhism's mantra of compassion. Producer Hector Zazou multi-tracked her voice and included the chants of Tibetan monks on 1998's *Coming Home*, and Lhamo's fame grew.

She didn't want it; not really. Not unless it served her goal. In 2004 she founded the One Drop of Kindness Foundation, and from her current base in Kingston, upstate New York, went on to eschew the limelight, spending a decade working with marginal communities at homeless shelters and at her home.

Produced by Greek-Californian John Alevizakis, Lhamo's current seventh album showcases a voice even richer, and more powerful, than before. Sung in Tibetan, titled in English, all seven tracks speak to the theme of the album's title while variously incorporating the groove and excitement of Middle Eastern and West African rhythms, the loops and spirals of trance and the beauty of vocal waves that continue to astound.

"We need to look after each other," she says. "Together, drop by drop, we can change the world." JANE CORNWELL

SHORTLISTED

Debashish Bhattacharya – *The Sound of the Soul* (Abstract Logix)
Aditya Prakash – *ISOLASHUN* (New Amsterdam Records)
Alam Khan, Arjun K Verma & Del Sol Quartet – *The Resonance Between* (Six Degrees / AMMP)
Batsükh Dorj – *Ögbelerim* (Buda Musique / Routes Nomades)

FUSION

WINNER

KAYHAN KALHOR & TOUMANI DIABATÉ

***The Sky is the Same Colour Everywhere* (Real World Records)**

The Sky is the Same Colour Everywhere was described in our *Top of the World* review as '*almost an hour of spontaneous stringed magic*.' Both Kayhan Kalhor, the leading spike fiddle player from Iran, and Toumani Diabaté, the leading *kora* player from Mali, have done numerous collaborations, but this Iran-meets-West Africa project was a first for them. The bowed *kamancheh* (although Kalhor frequently plucks his instrument) and plucked kora weave around each other creating a continuously evolving tapestry. "Toumani and I come from different places but are producing one thing – united rather than divided," says Kalhor. "We are all living in the same world. That is the message."

The two musicians came together in 2016 at the Morgenland Festival in Osnabrück, Germany, which specialises in new collaborations like this. They had no preparation except for a sound check and the piece evolved spontaneously. Both performers come from musical cultures where improvisation plays a major role, and that is clearly why it works so well and sounds so organic. The recording was made in Paris after a handful of concerts following on from Morgenland; the improvisatory feeling is still fresh.

The Sky is the Same Colour Everywhere takes its title from the poem 'Ballad of the Wayfarer' by Iran's Mehdi Akhavan-Sales (1929-1990). With migration an increasing problem in the world, the idea of being united rather than divided is increasingly important. Toumani says:

Andy Spyra

"Kayhan and I may be from different countries, but we're coming from the same place." *SIMON BROUGHTON*

SHORTLISTED

Arooj Aftab, Vijay Iyer & Shahzad Ismaily – *Love in Exile* (Verve Records)
Dele Sosimi & The Estuary 21 – *The Confluence* (Wah Wah 45s)
African Head Charge – *A Trip to Bolgatanga* (On-U Sound)
Meral Polat Trio – *Ez Kî Me* (Meral Polat Records)

BEST NEWCOMER

BALA DESEJO

***SIM SIM SIM* (Mr Bongo)**

Bala Desejo came as a surprise to more than just their audience. The group of school friends, Julia Mestre, Dora Morelenbaum, Zé Ibarra and Lucas Nunes, moved in together during lockdown without much thought as to the music that might come out of it. After a few months, however, a band was formed. And after some fan-garnering performances, a recording opportunity was secured. The resulting debut, *SIM SIM SIM,* is a smooth, grooving, *tropicália*, MBP and jazz-flecked delight. The friendship between all four band members diffuses warmly through the close harmonies, playful chatter and balanced instrumentation. What's more, it's consistent: each of *SIM SIM SIM*'s 13 tracks offers something distinct, shining a light on a new aspect of the group's musicality – whether it's Mestre and Morelenbaum's close harmonies in conversation with Ibarra's soft voice in the funk-riddled 'Lua Comanche'; the reggae-esque guitar and soaring brass of 'Clama Floresta'; the jazz-samba-dance anthem of 'Dourado Dourado'; the be-bopping, 60s pop joy of 'Lambe Lambe' or the enigmatic, mischievous whispers of 'Sim Sim Sim'.

Since the release and acclaim of this album (which won a Latin Grammy), the band have gone on to tour internationally, taking their sound everywhere from Japan to Germany, with a short stint in the UK. In between, members have been taking time to focus on different projects, too: Julia Mestre recently released the more pop-oriented *ARREPIADA*; Zé Ibarra released a solo album, *Marquês, 256*, in 2023

Estêvão Andrade

and is now preparing for the release of *Hoje, Ontem* with his band Dônica; and Morelenbaum saw her solo EP *Vento de Beirada* get a much-deserved international release in September last year.

After announcing a farewell tour this year, Bala assured their fans it was the album they were saying farewell to, and not the group. On Instagram, they wrote, '*SIM SIM SIM says goodbye to the stage, but not Bala, Bala goes beyond the album, Bala continues… Now it's time to celebrate and end [the SIM SIM SIM tour] with a flourish*.' The multi-talented group, and the individuals that make it up, are surely going to continue to pique our ears and interest in the year(s) to come. *EMMA RYCROFT*

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"just a man with his voice and guitar doing some good old fashioned diddly-diddly-bop-bop"
newton

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SAT 04 MAY **GALASHIELS** - MAC ARTS
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THE MEN THEY COULDN'T HANG

SOME HAS BLOWN... TEARS HAVE FLOWN...
THE MAGNIFICENT 40

SAT 4 MAY BRIGHTON PATTERNS
FRI 10 MAY HOLMFIRTH PICTUREDROME

SKERRYVORE

MAY
15 CARLISLE
OLD FIRE STATION

18 CHESTER
THE LIVE ROOMS

25 HOLMFIRTH
PICTUREDROME

RED HOT CHILLI PIPERS

FEATURING *THE RED HOT CHILLI DANCERS*

NEWCASTLE TYNE THEATRE | MAY 24 2024	JUNE 13 2024 | BURY ST EDMUNDS THE APEX
HARROGATE ROYAL HALL | MAY 25 2024	JUNE 14 2024 | ST ALBANS ALBAN ARENA
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KINDRED Spirit

On returning to her native Somaliland, **Sahra Halgan** reflects on a voyage of struggle, activism and discovery, marked by a chance encounter with an unlikely French musical family and a drive for positive change. "I want to show the world how strong our country's women are," she tells ***Daniel Brown***

Just how did Sahra Halgan discover the therapeutic qualities of her voice? The Somaliland musician pauses, her eyes cloud and her hands tense over her shawl. "It was back in the late 80s; I was a self-taught nurse in the liberation war against Somalia. I was at the side of our injured resistance fighters. We had run out of all medication and they were in intense pain, especially at night. So, I started singing our traditional Isaaq songs to take their minds off their suffering. It calmed them down, they asked for more."

And the 52-year-old hasn't stopped singing since. Not only in her home capital of Hargeisa but worldwide, including a standout concert at last year's WOMAD. Now, she is releasing the third album by her Sahra Halgan trio, through a tour which will include the UK at the end of the year. Once again, the album features a counter-intuitive crossover between Halgan's modern classical Somali *qaraami* melodies, Maël Salètes' distorted rock'n'roll guitars and the West African percussion of Aymeric Krol. The band added the electronic keyboards of Régis Monte for the eight-day recording in Lyon's Rumble Inn Studio last November which gave birth to the 12 tracks on *Hiddo Dhawr*.

"We really worked hard to find a common ground," Halgan says. "Unlike our previous recordings, we spent months forging a *métissage* which never erased our respective musical identities. By the end, I felt there were no frontiers between us." Sitting opposite us in Radio France International's waiting room, where they just finished a session for Laurence Aloir's long-running *Musiques du Monde* weekly, Krol chips in: "We're permanently seeking a consensus which can be tough at times. The quarter tones of the Oriental *oud*, for example, need to be transposed to Salètes' electric guitars and Monte's well-tempered keyboard. But it also gives our music a strong identity. Ours is a little family that works well together."

That family came together in a circuitous way in Lyon in 2010, reflecting Halgan's long journey from the Horn of Africa. This mother of five comes from Somaliland's Sa'ad Musa community, a subgroup of the Isaaq clan which dominates the country's northern capital Hargeisa, known by Somalis as 'The Mother of Somali Arts and Culture'. "My community frowned on the notion of women singing. But with the onslaught by Siad Barre's Somalia in the 80s, they had other worries on their

Above: Halgan performing at WOMAD 2023; Top right (L-R): Aymeric Krol, Halgan, Régis Monte and Maël Salètes

mind. And I came from a tolerant family with a rich poetic heritage, including my grandfather, the bard Hilaac Dheere. So, I began singing at 13."

Hargeisa's flattening by Barre in 1988 (with a death toll estimated between 50,000 and 200,000) forced Halgan to flee to Europe. By then, she had adopted the stage name of Halgan: "I had joined the Somali National Movement (SNM) and they had a radio called Halgan, which means 'struggle.' They started playing my songs, so someone gave me the name, and I've kept it ever since." At 22, Halgan set off alone for London to join her family and a strong community of Somalilanders (which includes a certain Mo Farah, who has been known to hoist the country's tricolour flag on victory laps). "But, in France, I couldn't get through [UK] border control with my papers." So, why Lyon? "You know, it was the military who chased me out of my country, someone with the same colour of skin, same language, same religion. And in Lyon, a man welcomed me into his home. He was white, Christian and spoke a language foreign to me, but opened his home to me. And I told myself: 'Humans still exist on this Earth.' So, I stayed."

Her first album, 2009's solo *Somaliland*, did not receive the traction she hoped, and she survived through menial jobs. It was only after the Rhône Alpes authorities organised a meeting between refugee artists and local musicians that Sahra's career took a turn for the good. "Aymeric was there. He was more familiar with Mandingo [also spelt Mandinka] music, having founded the Malian band BKO Quintet, but he has a fantastic sense of adaptation. We added the distorted guitars of Maël and started to explore our respective worlds. Five years later, we brought out our first album, *Faransiskiyo Somaliland*, followed by *Waa Dardaaran* in 2020, both doing really well. That's the kind of rhythm I like, an album every four to five years." Her songs spoke of love and rebuilding a nation unrecognised by the international community (despite peaceful transitions and multi-party politics since its creation in 1991, Somaliland remains the world's largest unrecognised state). Many of the lyrics were penned by her former husband, the poet Maxamed Cadaani, who continues to collaborate with the singer to this day.

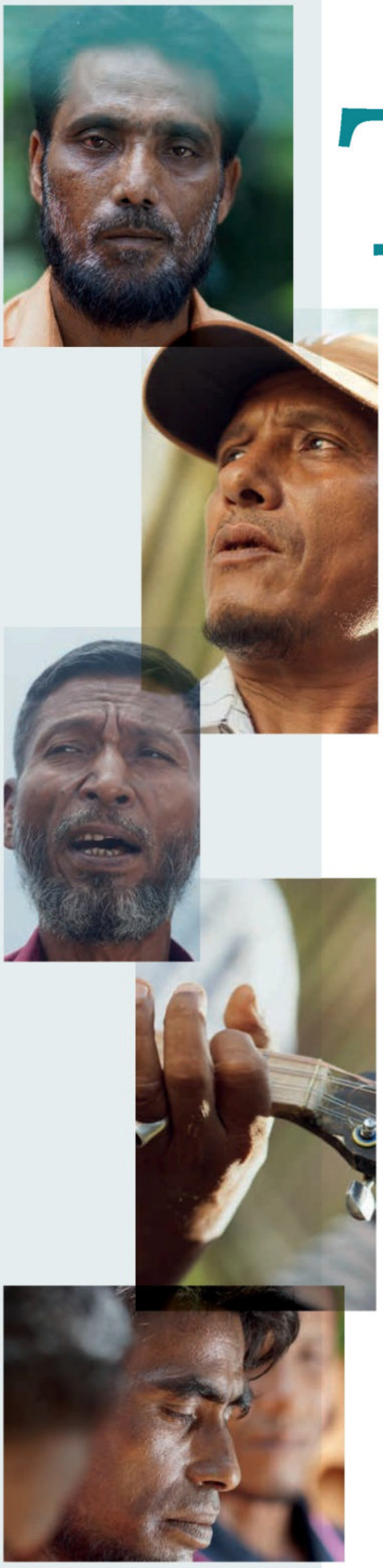
The gaps between her records and tours also allow Halgan to develop a project dear to her heart, which has given her the name of her latest album. "I returned to Hargeisa in 2013 and hardly recognised it. It had been razed to the ground 25 years earlier and totally rebuilt. But one thing hadn't changed: a thirst for culture and music, yet no space for women artists. So, I set about changing that." Since moving back, she has steadfastly built a space called Hiddo Dhawr (Promote Culture), a centre mirroring the city's burgeoning cultural scene. "This is a musical oasis, especially for aspiring women artists," she says proudly. "Everything you see in this venue was made by women. I want to show the world how strong our country's women are." Hiddo Dhawr currently employs 20 people and Halgan has shown sharp entrepreneurial acumen to consolidate it as the country's premier music centre. Now, she is spreading the word through the album of the same name. Through the dozen songs of her latest album, she describes her love for her homeland, its fertile land and generous people. But some also point to the divide between the sexes: in 'Lamahuran' Sahra subtly criticises men who forget that women are their mothers, sisters, confidantes. "It's a contradiction that everyone ignores," she laments.

Does she ever imagine plunging into politics, to iron out such contradictions, I ask? She tuts, shaking her head: "If you become a politician you must respect protocol, the party project thingamajig. Not for me. I want to remain a free artist and say what I want to say to those ministers. I don't want to be trapped." Her message echoes the song 'Dardaaran' from her previous album, in which she warns current Somaliland president Muse Bihi Abdi that the power is not his alone, he must work for all the people. Or, as she told reporter Megan Iacobini de Fazio recently, '*the people can take back that power.*' ◆

+ *Hiddo Dhawr* *is a Top of the World this issue, see p44. 'Laga' is on this issue's compilation, track 1*

"I RETURNED TO **HARGEISA** [AND] ONE THING HADN'T CHANGED: A **THIRST** FOR **CULTURE** AND **MUSIC**, YET NO **SPACE** FOR **WOMEN ARTISTS**. SO, I SET ABOUT CHANGING THAT"

Colin Miller, Xavier Courraud, Marion Bomaz



HIDDEN TALES

Ian Brennan is a hugely successful producer whose work has often graced the pages of *Songlines*. He's produced albums by the likes of Ustad Saami, Zomba Prison Project, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Malawi Mouse Boys, The Good Ones, Sainkho Namtchylak and Tinariwen, whose Brennan-produced album won a Grammy. Many of Brennan's projects are characterised by his thirst for exploration and drive to give underrepresented people a platform, as evidenced by recent albums recording inmates at Parchman Prison and centenarian singers in Azerbaijan. Brennan is also a writerand his latest book, *Missing Music: Voices from Where the Dirt Roads End*, contains many of the stories behind his albums, together with photography by his wife, Italian-Rwandan photographer/filmmaker Marilena Umuhoza Delli. Here, we bring you a selection of excerpts from this new book, collecting stories behind some of the most singular albums that we have had the privilege of hearing

TEXT BY **IAN BRENNAN**
PHOTOS BY **MARILENA UMUHOZA DELLI**

Rohingya Refugees

Once I Had a Home

Hardly a 'small' country, Bangladesh has the eighth largest population in the world and is one of the most densely populated. It's estimated that as many as three million people died during their battle for independence from Pakistan in 1971. Known for its humidity, the nation has never recorded a temperature below freezing.

In 1982, the Rohingya people were made stateless on the land they've lived on for thousands of years and became 'unlisted' as one of the Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) government's 135 '*national races*.' Today, the Myanmar military rulers refuse the use of the term Rohingya, instead referring to the Rohingya as illegal immigrants. The Myanmar military aggressions have officially been declared a genocide and experts state that the Rohingya are one of the most persecuted minorities in the world.

The Rohingya refugee camp [in Bangladesh, bordering Myanmar] is estimated as the largest in the world and currently houses almost one million people. Most residents are not allowed to exit the camp, so we came to them. Gangs operate within the camp and women are often exploited for sex work due to food shortages. Currently, families are provided $0.08 a day for meals, yet a single egg costs $0.11.

With 96% humidity filling the summer air, the sweat blanketed my body in seconds, pouring off my face and onto the equipment, presenting a new operational hazard for the recording deck.

Here I achieved the dubious distinction of having been food poisoned on a fifth continent. I stood dehydrated in the midday sun as calls to prayer were sounded from all

sides. People bowed down to pray just as I fell on all fours and blew chunks across an unfinished rooftop. If ever there was an opportunity for religious conversion or a sign from God, it was now.

There was no prompting from us as to what the singers should write about. Without fail, though, group after group sang about only two topics: the impact of the genocide and love songs. Titles like 'We Were Forced Across the River (My Mother Died from the Pain)' and 'The Army Tortured Us & Raped My 12-year-old Cousin Before Killing Her' repeatedly and consistently revealed the horrors. Though many female singers were invited to participate, none did so due to local religious customs that frowned upon women singing solo publicly. For the male groups, the mandolin was the core instrument, and they used a mop-bucket drum and tree-twigs for mallets.

As one vocalist described the ordeal he'd faced being exiled from his land, his voice suddenly broke and he began quivering. Soon the emotion radiated to his bandmates and then others gathered. It's rare to see a group of grown men weeping openly together, especially those so otherwise stoic. I was overcome, but refrained, turning away.

Their pain was not mine to claim.

The oldest voice in the world

Thank you for bringing me back to the sky

'My life is good. It is like a flower.
My life is as long as a tree,
like a stone in the river.'

In the southern mountains of Azerbaijan – mere miles from the Iranian border – are the villages of the 'long-livers.' Legend has it that the world's oldest man hailed from there – having survived to age 168 and fathered his twenty-third child when he was a mere 136, spanning two of my father's lifetimes in one.

We ventured there as a deliberate act of anti-ageism, a counter to mass media's festishising of youth. I've often preferred singers' voices as they age: Little Jimmy Scott, Billie Holliday, Sinatra, Merle Haggard. Less pristine, but gaining depth and nuance.

We visited village after rural village ravaged by COVID. The tale was sadly the same, most residents over a hundred had died in recent months. That included the oldest known woman in the country. Years prior, the news of her being officially named as the nation's oldest person had been widespread, but her death remained conspicuously unreported for over a year.

The seatbelt-less, local driver texted while steering with one knee and skirting a snowy cliff, and we faced the irony of dying prematurely a few football fields short of the village where the oldest person in history had lived. The razor-edged mountains there were enough to raise Ansel Adam from the dead, sparked by an urge to destroy his own aggrandised negatives.

Ultimately, we discovered person after person, laying on floor-bound mattresses as if awaiting our arrival, like wormholes tucked away within village back rooms.

Theirs were voices featuring distortion boxes built by time. While recording, I removed my headphones more than once thinking there was some malfunction in the machinery to only realise that what I was hearing was their pure tone. This was a rare instance of many people not making the cut for being too young – a mere 90 or 86 failed to impress. These are lives lived in analogue, standing as an antidote to Artificial Intelligence art and Auto-Tuned vocals.

With Azerbaijan being located on the other side of the globe, the echoes of First Nation American chants were made all the eerier. Maybe most striking was how often many of the singers, one hundred years on, sang of their mother[s].

One man asserted that "the shepherd sees everything." Mid-song, that shepherd was overcome and stood to leave the room after having crooned a song his mother had sung. In awkward suspense, we feared our visit had caused him unnecessary upset or injury. But when he returned, he beamed, grabbed my hand, and kissed it repeatedly.

"Thank you for bringing me back to the sky," he said.

microphones is almost audible. And steel-string guitars are not an option. They rust almost instantaneously. So the mellower tone of nylon-strings defines the land.

A brother duo started by playing a Chuck Berry song, but reported that they did not know where the tune came from. "It's just something we heard." The reference to a '*ding-a-ling*' seemed lost in transmission, converted phonetically from risqué to mere sound.

The main writer, singer and mentor was Jabini. A military man, he stood less than 5' 6" but with an imposing build. His gym, a lifetime of hard work. He plays the guitar upside-down due to being left-handed.

With his mournful melodies and handle-bar moustache, it's as if Merle Haggard had been raised in the Amazon instead of Bakersfield. (Lest it be forgotten, Mr Haggard's band, The Strangers' original front-man was African-American.)

And as so often is the case, the best songs emerged only after we were done recording. The equipment had to be re-setup three separate times and brought to the men on the front porch, as they sang almost non-stop through the night, growing freer as the bottles of rum were drained. They seemed in command of an almost inexhaustible ability to conjure new songs. Finally, they concluded with an anthem written on the spot: 'One Mother, Two Hearts'.

Saramaccan Sound

Where the river bends is only the beginning

'I cut down a tree.
I made two boats.
They will carry me to the sea.'

Entering the rain forest, 'the lungs of the earth,' we rode upriver to villages reached only by boat. We passed many communities that had been swallowed whole, as well as many of the still existing villages that soon may no longer be there – drowned downriver from the dams, engulfed by the rising tides. For now though, naked children bathed and played on the banks, scenes probably largely unchanged from centuries past. The river remains the lifeline.

The singers were Saramaccan. Linguists consider the Saramaccan language notable because its vocabulary is based on two European source languages, English (30%) and Portuguese (20%), and various West and Central African languages (50%), but it diverges considerably from all of them. The African component accounts for over half of the vocabulary, the highest percentage in the Americas. A language born from fugitive slaves, its meaning is camouflaged by shuffling around accented syllables and inverting tones.

Suriname has a little over half a million people and though it is geographically the smallest nation in South America, it is one of the least densely populated places on Earth.

The physical place where a recording occurs is a backing instrument in any music made. My laptop and two mics succumbed to the humidity – an offering to the sound Gods. Enveloped by forest and yards away from the river, the humidity seeping into the

Parchman Prison Prayer

Some Mississippi Sunday Morning

Instead of attending the Grammys, I opted to fly to Mississippi and record with prisoners at the notorious Parchman Prison. I had faith the 'amateur' voices there would be more compelling. The institution has a rich musical history with Son House, Bukka White, RL Burnside, and even Elvis Presley's father, Vernon Presley, having been former residents.

With just over a week's notice I'd taken a red eye flight and would only be allowed a few hours inside the walls to record. One wrong turn on the way from the airport or a single delayed flight and the whole enterprise would've been moot.

A friend had warned that the prison is a place few people visit. In reality it is a place far too many go. With over two million people incarcerated, the United States currently leads the world both in the total number of people in prison and also the rate per capita. And Mississippi has the second highest incarceration rate in the country at more than six times the state, Vermont, with the lowest.

Mississippi's oldest penitentiary, Parchman was established in 1901 and has one of the

highest number of prisoner mortalities in the nation as well as experiencing ongoing riots. Parchman is located just a hop and a skip to the northwest of Money, Mississippi where Emmett Till was so heinously murdered. Scandals rocked the prison in recent years with multiple deaths and homicides. This led Jay-Z to file a class action suit on behalf of the inmates due to the '*barbaric*' and '*abhorrent*' conditions, with rat infestations and raw sewage filling common areas.

After years of bureaucratic finagling to make my visit possible, at the gate the guard waved me through without even searching me or my gear. I could've easily been smuggling bazookas or kilos. I parked, tossed together what little kit I'd been allowed, and within minutes of saying hello, we were recording.

Due to restrictions on video and photos, the only artefacts from this meeting are the sounds, making the voices all the more ethereal and ghostly. This stands in stark contrast to increasingly image-based music. Rapists, murderers and sex offenders vocalising lifetimes of hurt.

All had eyes leaden with regret, hooded to protect themselves from the too much they'd already seen. A veil of sadness seemed to shroud them, an inescapable regret that their environment confronted them with unrelentingly. Voices softened and textured by mistakes rang as testament to the singers no longer being the people they'd been before.

Though many outstripped me in size and strength, not only were these men not menacing, they demonstrated greater effort than most to demonstrate their good intentions – that they'd 'learned their lesson.' Most songs were covers of Gospel standards, but delivered so imbued with subtext that they were transformed almost unrecognizably from the source material.

When an atheist takes to the music, genre and preconceptions have been transcended, and following the release of the album I saw this happen a hundred times over. A triumph of this recording was its successful integration of white and Black inmates, whose services had often been held separately due to racial tensions. Different prisoners didn't start out sitting together but the boundaries gradually dissolved and it ended in hugs, laughter, high-fives and every single person in the room standing and playing together for ten minutes of unity.

These were voices unchained, if only for those few hours, expressing a depth of freedom otherwise denied and restrained.

The Good Ones

Rwanda… you see ghosts, I see sky

The Good Ones' latest album concludes with the epic, seven-minute dirge 'Love Can Lead the Way', a lesson that they've hard-earned. If these two men – who've battled poverty their entire life, after already having survived a genocide – can embrace love as a path forward, that can't but be something we should all ponder more closely.

Surely, there must be a better way.

+ *Ian Brennan's* ***Missing Music: Voices from Where the Dirt Roads End*** *is published by PM Press*

Reviews

We review full-length world music, roots and folk albums (not singles or EPs), available on CD, digital or vinyl.
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Africa *44*
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The *Songlines* Top of the World compilation, featuring tracks from our favourite albums each issue, can be downloaded by visiting bit.ly/SLTOTW197

Pamela Badjogo
YIÊH

Raphia

★★★★½

Gabon-born singer Pamela Badjogo honed her chops as a backing vocalist for Grammy-winning powerhouse diva Angélique Kidjo, then went on to feature in line-ups including Alba Griot Ensemble and – with the likes of Kidjo, Oumou Sangaré and Kandia Kouyaté – the consciousness-raising collective that is Les Amazones d'Afrique. Like most of the artists that have moved through the latter, the France-based Badjogo is a force in her own right, and has flexed her penchant for mixing Afro pop, Bantu-style highlife and Afrobeat with effervescent synths and female-empowerment lyrics across solo albums *Mes Couleurs* (2016) and *Kaba* (2021). And while Badjogo's agency is such that Kwame Yeboah, music director of Ghanaian icons Pat Thomas & Ebo Taylor, has once again lent his services to this appealing, if sometimes overproduced, album, her solo career – unlike that of former Amazones member Rokia Koné – has never quite garnered the international attention it deserves. There is much to love on *YIÊH*, not least the way Badjogo's lilting, soulful voice rides waves of ringing highlife guitar on the bittersweet title-track, or the championing of Black womanhood in 'Letondo', the effervescent, eminently danceable, cleverly multilingual lead single. What Badjogo calls her '*joyful feminism*' is palpable.

JANE CORNWELL

TRACK TO TRY *Letondo*

Sahra Halgan
Hiddo Dhawr

Danaya Music

★★★★½

Sahra Halgan is a hero of Somaliland's music. At home, in the unrecognised Somali state's capital, Hargeisa, she runs the Hiddo Dhawr ('promoting culture') club, the first live music venue since the country declared independence in 1991. Abroad, she is taking Somali music to new places, literally and metaphorically. Her fourth album, also *Hiddo Dhawr*, is her best so far.

Halgan's vibrato-heavy voice brings forth songs that speak of love and politics – often simultaneously – wrapped in the proverbs and poetics for which Somalis are so famous. But while Halgan keeps everything rooted in the Somali heritage, her France-based band introduce widespread influences, most notably from the other side of the continent. Maël Salètes' guitar and Aymeric Krol's percussion reflect the sounds of the Songhai and Touareg of northern Mali. That connection of East and West – a surprising So-Mali-Land fusion – works really well, the two areas united across the Sahara by bluesy pentatonics and laid-back grooves. The quartet is completed by Régis Monte, whose keys consciously echo the classic-era Somali pop of the 70s and 80s, and add some devilishly funky basslines whenever appropriate.

Halgan and her group rollick through up-and-dance tunes and brood over romantic laments – a testament to Somaliland's distinctive and flexible musical culture and its champion's forward-thinking and ceaseless advocacy.

JIM HICKSON

TRACK TO TRY *Diiyoohidii*

Toumani Diabaté & Ballaké Sissoko
New Ancient Strings

Chrysalis

★★★★★

Reissued to mark the 25th anniversary of its 1999 release on Joe Boyd's Hannibal label, *New Ancient Strings* remains a landmark in West African music and helped to put the *kora* on the world stage as firmly as Ravi Shankar made the *sitar* a globally recognised instrument. Bringing together the two finest young kora virtuosi of their generation, the record echoed the ground-breaking *Ancient Strings* album released by Toumani and Ballaké's fathers Sidiki Diabaté and Djelimady Sissoko in 1970, but propelled their combined 42 strings into new and more adventurous spaces while maintaining the elegant classicism of acoustic Mande tradition. Recorded in a single live take in Bamako on the night of Mali's

Xavier Courraud

national independence day in 1997, there were no overdubs and hardly any editing, just spontaneous instrumental genius at its most intuitive. This re-release of *New Ancient Strings* will be the first of two reissues being made by Chrysalis of the Hannibal catalogue, with another album from 1999, Taj Mahal & Toumani Diabaté's *Kulanjan*, set to be released later this year. The reissue of *New Ancient Strings* comes with a new essay and photos by Lucy Durán, who co-produced the original, and also sees the album's first ever release on vinyl.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

TRACK TO TRY *Bi Lamban*

Tiken Jah Fakoly
Acoustic

Chapter Two

★★★★½

Along with Alpha Blondy and the late Lucky Dube, Ivory Coast's Tiken Jah Fakoly is part of a righteous trinity that remains unrivalled in African roots reggae. Yet here he puts aside the one-drop rhythms, skanking basslines and snare-drum rimshots to reinvent some of his best known reggae anthems with traditional African phrasing and acoustic instrumentation.

Produced by Jonathan Quarmby (who also helmed Tiken's albums since 2007 and has produced Ziggy Marley), *ngoni*, *balafon*, *kora*, *soku* (single-string fiddle) and talking drums create a classic Mande soundbed while a cast of well-chosen guests adds a more contemporary feel. The *chanson*-like tones of Bernard Lavilliers combine splendidly with Tiken's husky voice on the swaying 'Tonton d'America', Brazil's Chico César and Jamaican reggae veteran Horace Andy (Massive Attack) join him on 'Africain à Paris', a smart adaptation of Sting's 'Englishman in New York', the British-Tanzanian rapper Tiggs Da Author is heard to fine effect on 'Les Martyrs' and Mathieu Chédid (aka M) lends his high voice and guitar to 'Ouvrez Les Frontières'.

The spoken interludes taken from a documentary film which punctuate the songs grow tiresome after a while. But make no mistake: the music heard on *Acoustic* is among the finest Tiken Jah Fakoly has ever made.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

TRACK TO TRY *Les Martyrs (feat Tiggs Da Author)*

Elie Mbansing

TOP OF THE WORLD
TRACK 3

Ngwaka Son Systéme
Iboto Ngenge

Eck Echo

★★★★★

A fine balance of danceable music which pushes the boat out sonically and a sound firmly rooted in Congolese rumba and *soukous* that doesn't feel overly retro, *Iboto Ngenge* is definitely an impressive achievement for the eight piece's first record.

No surprise, with two members, Bom's Bomolo and Love Lokombe, being veterans of the band KOKOKO! – yet this is not wholly responsible for the quality of this album. The raw energy is amplified by the MCs Bebe Boomastyl and Héritier Lakala, as heard on the track, 'Lakala'. Flurries of words in Lingala are punctuated by chanting and coarsely shouted stanzas, bouncing playfully around punchy beats. Between distorted bass and euphoric ululations, many tracks, such as 'Zanga Mbongo' are imbued with an invigorating cacophony which harks to the ritualistic and trance-inducing musics native to Congo and which have impacted many of the styles that have blossomed throughout the country's history.

'Zanga Mbongo' (There is No Money) waxes on the dignity that can be found in scarcity, a powerful message which is reflected in jubilant open harmonies, and clean, sparkling guitar riffs recalling the timbre of legendary Congolese guitarist, Dr Nico.

The last two tracks take us onto the contemporary global dancefloor, with remixes that push the rhythms to a different plane, ready to induce whole different kinds of trance states.

NIK HANN

TRACK TO TRY *Zanga Mbongo*

Ann O'aro
BLEU

Buda Musique

★★★★★

O'aro's voice is breathtaking, heartbreaking. Gentle, but with great power behind it that occasionally erupts in a shocking flash… Her music has been a revelation. An enigmatic mix of classically inspired jazz, *chanson* and the *maloya* of her homeland, La Réunion – the latter often present only in the subtleties of voice and rhythm, but sometimes taking whole songs in its swirl. There is a darkness in the beauty, with unsettling sonic atmospheres reflecting the songs' disturbing topics. But it is beauty nonetheless.

BLEU is O'aro's third album; 2020's wonderful *Longoz*, was made with a sparse trio completed by Teddy Doris on trombone and Bino Waro on percussion. The sound is bigger now: O'aro adds piano for the first time, and the trio is expanded to a quartet with the 'machines' of Brice Nauroy, which include electronic sounds, effects, drones and elements of *musique concrète*. Overdubs create trombone choirs and interweaving vocal lines, but the group retains the intimacy of a chamber ensemble. Her accompanists are inspired, but it is songs with just O'aro and her piano, that are the most affective and touching. O'aro continues to go from strength to strength.

JIM HICKSON

TRACK TO TRY *In Utero Militari*

Dele Sosimi & The Estuary 21
The Confluence

Wah Wah 45s

★★★★½

If there's anything negative to say about Fela Kuti's music in particular and Afrobeat in general it's that it don't 'alf go on sometimes. As a part of Fela's Egypt 80 colossus, Hackney-born keyboard player Dele Sosimi would have participated in half-hour-plus live versions of the leader's classics. But he was also a co-founder of Femi Kuti's more concentrated Positive Force. With keyboard and vocal cohort Sam Duckworth and the rest of The Estuary 21 band (including guest percussion star, Snowboy), Sosimi has distilled things into a form of bonsai Afrobeat. All the customary ingredients are here, but it's as if the album's three-to-four-minute miniatures take their cue from, say, that simmering preamble before Fela's monumental 'Water No Get Enemy' explodes into life. Miniatures like the opening 'Ride Out the Storm', for example, or 'E Si Medo' or 'Otto Ti Jade' typically start with a simple riff to which the ingredients are gradually added to build almost subliminally to a kind of phantom climax. The latent power and sense of anticipation mesmerise. While the hard-hitting 'Alagbara Ma Me Ro' ramps up the power, the closing 'Stories' offers a sweet dessert of highlife. A terrific album by an impeccable band.

Dele Sosimi

Robert Humm

MARK SAMPSON

TRACK TO TRY *Otto Ti Jade*

AFRICA IN MOTION *DISPATCHES FROM AFRICA AND ITS DIASPORA*

By Chinonso Ihekire

With a 21-year-long tradition of staging local and international acts, **Sauti Za Busara** returned to the spirited shores of Zanzibar on February 9-11, cementing its legacy as the epitome of festivals for live African music. From East African percussion to European jazz, Sauti Za Busara was awash with over 200 performers from across the world. The three-day festival sparked with iconic concerts that showcased a brilliant variety of artists. One key highlight was Nigerian Afrobeat maverick Mádé Kuti, the grandson of Fela Kuti, who performed with vivid zest. With his live band, he performed his soft-toned, politically -harged compositions. Another was Singeli singer Sholo Mwamba whose high-octane renditions captured the soul of traditional Tanzanian rhythms. Launched in 2003 in a village in the Tanzanian Unguja Islands, the festival has aimed to showcase the best of East African music and beyond. This year, the likes of South Africa's Selmor Mtukudzi, Zimbabwe's Mary Anibal and psychedelic jazz maestros The Brother Moves On, as well as Algeria's Ita & Mehdy, graced its multicultural and impactful stages. Best of all, there was one free stage at the Forodhani Gardens.

South African pop-diva **Tyla** became the first winner of the Best African Music Performance category at the 2024 Grammys. The 22-year-old chanteuse beat the other contenders, a solid line-up of Nigerian superstars Davido, Burna Boy, Asake and Ayra Starr, to clinch the gilded Gramophone. Tyla's winning song, 'Water', was released in the summer of 2023 and it quickly amassed popularity on TikTok and Instagram with waist-whining dance challenges driving the traffic. The sensual tune ranked among the top ten African songs in the US and UK when it was released. Giving her acceptance speech she said, "If you don't know me, my name is Tyla. I'm from South Africa and last year God decided to change my whole life, so thank you so much to God. Thank you to my team, my family; I know my mother's crying somewhere in here. Thank you to the Recording Academy for this category. It's so important and I know I'm forgetting some things, but I won a Grammy! Thank you, thank you." Born Tyla Laura Seethal in the cultural nerve centre of Johannesburg, Tyla started her professional music career in 2019 with the release of 'Getting Late', working alongside street-focused South African producers. She signed to South Africa-based Epic Records in 2021, and released her debut album that year.

Mary Anibal at Sauti Za Busara festival

Two Nigerian singers emerged victorious at this year's **Music of Black Origin (MOBO) Awards**, held at the Utilita Arena in Sheffield, UK, in February. During a ceremony hosted by British actor and comedian Babatunde Aléshé and reality TV star Indiyah Polack, Nigerian Christian Gospel act Limoblaze clinched the Best Gospel Act award, while his pop-fusion counterpart Asake was crowned as the Best African Music Act for the year, beating out competition from Nigeria's Burna Boy, Davido, Rema, Wizkid, Adekunle Gold and Ayra Starr, Cameroonian singer Libianca and South Africa's Tyla, as well as acclaimed Eswatini DJ Uncle Waffles.

Abdallah Oumbadougou
Amghar: The Godfather of Tuareg Music – Vol One

Petaluma

★★★★½

FEATURED REISSUE

The style of Touareg guitar music known to the world as 'desert blues' and to the musicians themselves as *assouf* has some roots in the refugee camps in Libya where in the 1980s young Touareg men trained as rebel soldiers and expressed their desire for the liberation of their people in song.

The lead in developing this new style of rebel music was taken by two significant groups. The first was Tinariwen, from the Saharan territory that is today part of Mali. The other was Takrist Nakal, from the deserts of northern Niger.

While the Tinariwen story has been often told, far less familiar is the contribution of Takrist Nakal and, in particular, its founder Abdallah ag Oumbadougou. '*He was part of the story, and maybe there's not enough about him now in the history*,' Tinariwen founding member Ibrahim ag Alhabib notes. This set of 14 tracks recorded by Oumbadougou during '*the first decade of the 21st century*,' just as Tinariwen was taking Touareg music to the outside world for the first time, seeks to correct the injustice.

Born in Niger in 1962, Oumbadougou fought with a Kalashnikov in the Touareg rebellion of the early 1990s and entertained his fellow fighters around the campfire with his guitar. His rebel songs circulated on cassette. His 1995 album *Anou Malan* was one of the earliest Touareg guitar recordings and made Oumbadougou a musical hero in Niger, where he went on to establish two music schools and inspired a younger generation of Touareg guitarists including Bombino and Mdou Moctar.

Half a dozen of the tracks included in this compilation have never previously been released. Others come from a series of albums that seem to have enjoyed little circulation outside Niger, although Oumbadougou did gain some global attention with the collective Desert Rebel, in which he was backed by members of Mano Negra and Gnawa Diffusion and with whom he recorded the 2006 album *Culture Equitable*. His final album *Zozodinga* appeared in 2012 and his last years were blighted by ill-health before his untimely death from a heart attack in 2020.

For the most part what we get here are essentially folk songs played on acoustic guitar, albeit with the now familiar, loping syncopated rhythm and call-and-response vocals. As such they're a treat for those who love the acoustic interludes on Tinariwen's albums and wish they would do it more often. For the rest 'Afrikya' and 'He Ténéré' are classic Touareg blues-rockers recorded live with full band and the studio cuts 'Imidiwan' and 'Illilagh Teneré' feature some scintillating electric guitar playing. Most intriguing of all, though, is 'Iwouksane', on which haunting Arabic strings would seem to open up an entire world of new possibilities for Touareg music which still await to be more fully explored.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

TRACK TO TRY
Iwouksane

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Americas REVIEWS

BrhyM
Deep Sea Vents
Zappo Productions / Thirty Tigers

★★★☆☆

Deep Sea Vents is a self-consciously quirky, sometimes witty and occasionally beguiling ten-track album of songs by Bruce Hornsby in collaboration with the New York-based, post-classical chamber sextet, yMusic, which was co-founded in 2008 by Rob Moose. A multi-instrumentalist, arranger, producer, conductor and orchestrator, Moose has worked with everyone from Taylor Swift and The Decemberists to Joshua Bell and Jay-Z. For *Deep Sea Vents*, Hornsby and yMusic (performing under the collective moniker BrhyM) have cast a loose-knit net of ruminations on the many permutations of water: ocean, rivulet, pirate preying ground. The album opener, 'Wild Whaling Life', comes out swinging with an acoustic bass groove around which strings, horns and winds dart like a school of fish in the open sea. 'Foreign Sounds' conveys the heartbreaking plight of a marine creature who can't find its way home due to underwater noise pollution. The title-track uses the near-farcical strains of a jazz-age vamp to plumb fathoms-deep geothermal fields. Some of the material on *Deep Sea Vents* is a tad too experimental for its own good, for example, the zig-zag rhythmic changes, rambling melodic lines and edgy vocal effects of 'Platypus Wow'. Otherwise, *Deep Sea Vents* offers listeners a satisfying dive.

DOUG DELOACH

TRACK TO TRY *Wild Whaling Life*

TOP OF THE WORLD TRACK 5

Aguidavi do Jêje
Aguidavi do Jêje
Rocinante

★★★★☆

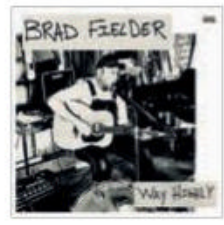
Slaves from present-day Nigeria, Benin and Togo brought Candomblé to Bahia (Brazil) where it thrived, developing into Afro-Brazilian ceremonies performed for Yoruba deities called *orixás*. This album was recorded live at Terreiro do Bogum in the heart of Salvador, '*one of Brazil's oldest Candomblé houses*,' where the sacred rhythms of Jêje (originating from the kingdom of Dahomey) are preserved. If you're interested in Brazilian percussion, this is a feast for your ears, 18 percussionists play the *agogô* (a double cowbell), the *shekere* (a dried gourd with beads), the *rum* (a tall hand drum) and many others, all working in syncopation with complex rhythms accompanied by chants and a *berimbau* or a deceptively simple melody plucked from a Bahian '*handmade gourd guitar*', as can be heard on 'Violão de Cabaça', with the participation of ex-minister of culture Gilberto Gil. Gil is of course renowned for his part in reviving Filhos de Gandhi, a carnival *bloco* which managed to repopularise Yoruba rhythms and culture in the Salvador carnival, thereby strengthening its African identity. The samba 'Salve os Caboclos' is a particularly stirring singalong, celebrating the various unsung grafters of Brazil: the seamen, the cowboys, the small-time diamond merchants, all to the guitar of Carlinhos Sete Cordas.

ANDY CUMMING

TRACK TO TRY *Salve os Caboclos (feat Carlinhos Sete Cordas)*

Brad Fielder
Way Highly
Brad Fielder

★★★☆☆



A salty dog of an album, Oklahoma roots musician and one-man band Brad Fielder's new album (or long-ish EP), *Way Highly*, is a hallucinogenic romp through the back country of American song. With a kick drum, a fuzzed out guitar, and the kind of overdriven vocals-through-vintage-mics that will remind you of the roughest edges of early rock'n'roll, Fielder is ploughing the same kind of field as the great Scott H Biram. Both are true lovers of the lost history of American folk music, and both put their own indelible stamp on the old songs, reverent to the source, but too chaotic to deliver a faithful rendition. With *Way Highly*, Fielder's own original songs rub shoulders with traditional classics like 'He's A Mighty Good Leader' from Skip James and the strange Appalachian song 'I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground'. It's clear that Fielder's listened to the old country blues masters over and over, rendering a stamp of authenticity to songs of his own like 'Hundred Dollar Walk' or 'Stew Meat Hands'. On 'Every Day', he growls '*I'll make my living singing songs, every day*,' and you can hear quite clearly the grit and determination that's carried him across 30 years of live performances.

DEVON LÉGER

TRACK TO TRY *Every Day*

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Béla Fleck
Rhapsody in Blue
Béla Fleck Productions

★★★★☆

According to no less an authority than Jim Farrington, former Music Librarian and Director of the World Music Archive at Wesleyan University, George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* is arguably the most famous American classical music piece ever composed and certainly among '*the most often recorded*.'

Banjo maestro Béla Fleck's *Rhapsody in Blue* celebrates the 100th anniversary of the premiere of Gershwin's 'jazz concert' as performed by the Paul Whiteman band with the composer at the piano on February 12, 1924, at Aeolian Hall in New York City. Fleck's five-track tribute begins with 'Rhapsody in Blue(grass)', which features the piano replaced by a banjo and members of Fleck's *My Bluegrass Heart* band – Michael Cleveland, Sierra Hull, Justin Moses, Mark Schatz and Bryan Sutton – sitting in for the orchestra. The result is a consummately crafted, thoroughly swinging variation on Gershwin's composition. Similarly, 'Rhapsody in Blue(s)', which features Fleck with bosom bandmates Sam Bush, Jerry Douglas and Victor Wooten, turns what in lesser hands could easily have been a trifling romp into a legit fresh take on Gershwin's century-old masterwork. Fleck includes a wonderfully arranged classic arrangement of Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue' starring the banjo as instrumental soloist backed by Eric Jacobson & the Virginia Symphony Orchestra. Rounding out the album is a solo banjo rendition of Gershwin's 'Rialto Ripples', a ragtime number that was first performed in 1916 and published in 1917, and 'Unidentified Piece for Banjo,' a heretofore never recorded gem discovered at the Library of Congress.

DOUG DELOACH

TRACK TO TRY *Rhapsody in Blue(grass)*

Magic Tuber Stringband
Needlefall
Thrill Jockey

★★★★☆

The music on *Needlefall* is borne of one region, but two worlds. It finds Durham, North Carolina guitar-

Diego Bresani

Sasha Israel

TOP OF THE WORLD TRACK 7

Aoife O'Donovan
All My Friends

Yep Roc Records

★★★★☆

A little more than a century after the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution secured American women the right to vote, Aoife O'Donovan is releasing *All My Friends*, a collection of eight original songs and one cover focused on the fight for female suffrage, along with broader topics and questions, such as, '*What is the democracy for which the world is battling?*' That's the opening line from O'Donovan's 'America, Come', which, like much of *All My Friends*, is inspired by the public life, writings and speeches of Carrie Chapman Catt. During a roughly three decade span at the turn of the 20th century, Catt played a leading role in the National American Woman Suffrage Association and other organizations in a crusade to convince the requisite number of 36 of 48 state legislatures to ratify the 19th Amendment, which was accomplished in August 1920.

In musical terms, 'America, Come' is a profoundly anthemic song featuring O'Donovan on vocals, acoustic and electric guitars, and piano, The Westerlies (an avant-brass quartet), The Knights (a chamber orchestra conducted by O'Donovan's husband Eric Jacobsen) and the San Francisco Girls Chorus; with all and sundry arranged by Tanner Porter. The song launches with a rocking rhythm before segueing into a swelling brass/chamber passage, which heightens the dramatic impact of the lyrical incantations ('*Suffrage is coming – you know it*').

'Over the Finish Line' offers a warning about the current socio-political milieu, which poses a grave danger to progressive democracy ('*Once in a lifetime / The power is ours / But we'd rather stare at our phones*'). The mindful lyrics are enhanced by Anaïs Mitchell's softly elegant harmony singing and a simple arrangement of piano, bass, keys and pedal steel. Supported by a defiant, liberation-minded San Francisco Girls Chorus, 'Daughters' decries the female anti-suffragists who fought against their own best interests in Catt's day, a subset of the body politic that frustratingly persists in 2024.

All My Friends concludes with the songstress' interpretation of Bob Dylan's anti-racist 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll'. In 1963, Carroll, a 51-year-old mother working as a barmaid at a Baltimore hotel, was wantonly assaulted by William Zantzinger, the son of a Maryland plantation owner. Carroll died after Zantzinger struck her with his cane. The perpetrator's second-degree murder charge was reduced to manslaughter, which carried a six-month prison sentence. O'Donovan's rendering of 'Hattie' begins with a familiar instrumental refrain from 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic', altered to sound like an old radio programme. O'Donovan hums along with the tune before delivering a wrenchingly beautiful take on Dylan's indictment of systemic racism and inequitable justice in America.

DOUG DELOACH

TRACK TO TRY *America, Come*

Q&A

Aoife O'Donovan

Where does *All My Friends* fit in with your other records?
It's more lyrically pointed and more political than anything I've ever done. That said, it's historical in nature. It's not putting forth a single political agenda. It's looking inward and asking, 'Why are we still struggling with things that we struggled with a hundred years ago?'

Given the theme, how did you go about assembling the tracks?
Initially, it was five songs that went together without a break. As I wrote more music for the project, I split up the original cycle, but left the first three songs. It's a long form piece that jumps around, almost like flashbacks.

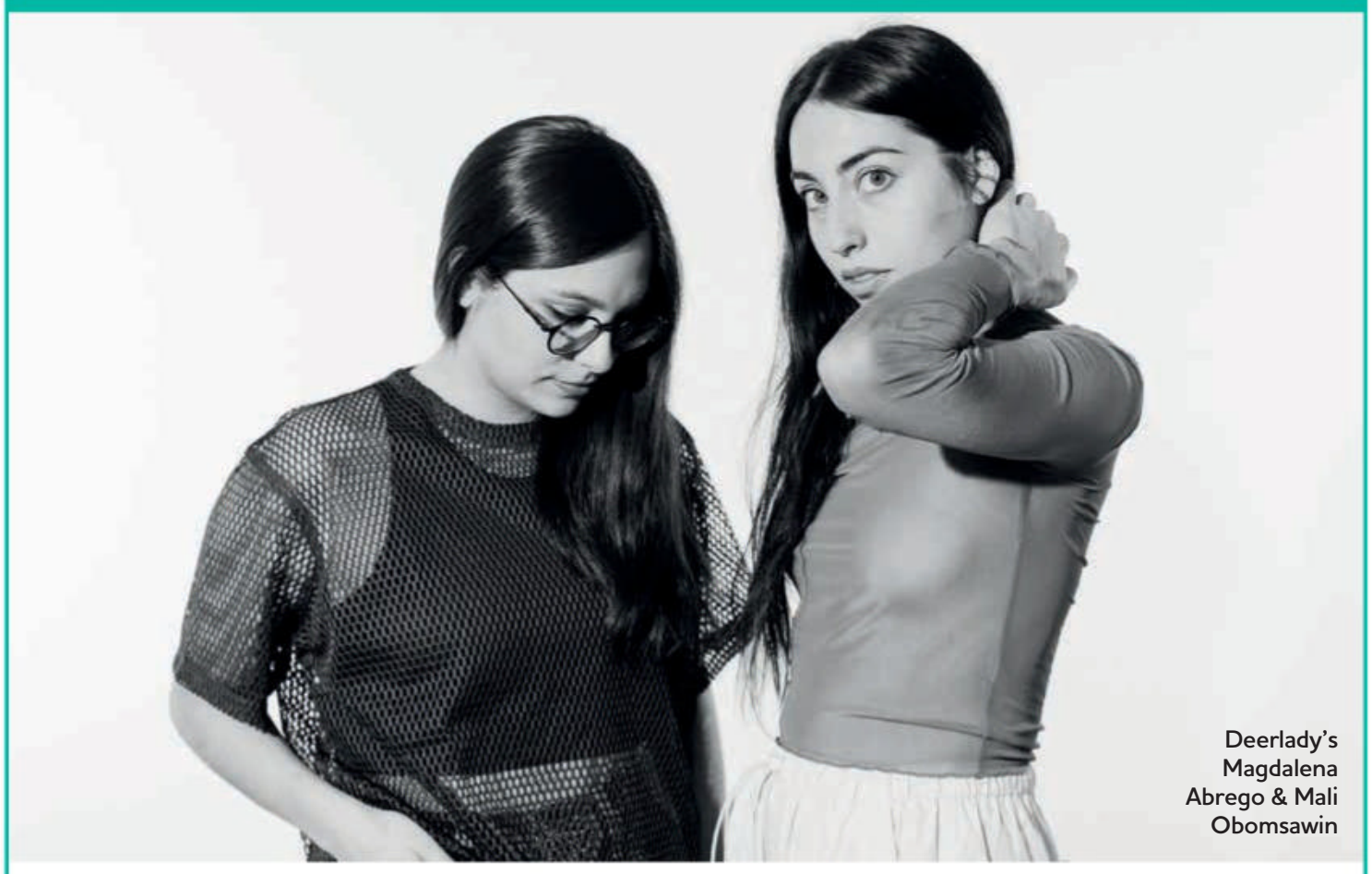
What brought the most joy when making *All My Friends*?
I loved getting to record the rhythm tracks live because I didn't get to do that for my last record. I wasn't present for the San Francisco Girls Chorus recording, but, when I listened to those tracks folded into the mixes for the first time, I was deeply moved.

Was this something you always wanted to do? When did this idea coalesce into a real project?
If you had asked me five years ago, 'Do you think you'll make a concept album about suffragists?', I would have answered 'No.' My husband, Eric Jacobsen, is the conductor of the Orlando Philharmonic, which commissioned me to write something honouring the centennial of the 19th Amendment. That blossomed into a much bigger thing.

Given the world we're living in right now, what's the core takeaway from *All My Friends*?
Even though we are living in a fractured time and a fractured society, I believe we can come together as citizens of this country and participate in democracy. That's my takeaway. We need to participate and we need to care.

ROOTS *US & CANADA*

by Devon Léger



Deerlady's Magdalena Abrego & Mali Obomsawin

A round-up of new releases of note from North America, the plan for this column is to showcase both artists who are pushing their traditions forward and roots music communities that may not be well known overseas. There's a wealth of great music coming out of the US and Canada these days, so check this column each issue to find new artists to love!

Bassist, songwriter, singer and composer Mali Obomsawin should be familiar to readers from her early work with American folk trio Lula Wiles, but her new work has been diving deep into free jazz and now indie circles. After a prominent music feature in one of the most powerful episodes of Indigenous-led TV show *Reservation Dogs*, Obomsawin's new duo, **Deerlady**, with New York guitarist and composer Magdalena Abrego is in the spotlight. Their album, ***Greatest Hits*** (5729715 Records DK ★★★★), is a shimmering landscape of song, soft and heartfelt, but simmering underneath. The duo call it an anti-colonial collaboration, but fans of Lula Wiles will recognize Obomsawin's deft, subtle songwriting as well.

Speaking of dynamic duos, the new album, ***Au Chemin 4*** (Alexis Chartrand ★★★★), from Québécois fiddle wunderkind **Alexis Chartrand** sees him united with one of the genre's best arrangers and deepest thinkers, **Cédric Dind-Lavoie**. Chartrand is known for his pensive reworkings of Québécois fiddle tunes, drawing them down to a stately tempo and pulling out the fine craftsmanship of these old melodies. Dind-Lavoie is a kindred soul whose superb 2021 album *Archives* built lush compositional soundscapes around scratchy old field recordings of Québécois trad. Here the two redefine a tradition known for its raucous party nature. It's a revelation and a joy to listen to.

We should expect nothing less than a sublime and joyful music experience from American roots band **Watchhouse**, and this is what we get from their performance on ***Austin City Limits Live at The Moody Theater*** (Yep Roc, ★★★★★). But more than that, there's an incredible poignancy to the timing of this particular concert. Recorded in January 2020 shortly before the world shut down from COVID-19, there's an impossible feeling of nostalgia in looking back at how we were. When Andrew softly sings '*Everything's so great, it can't get better / It makes me want to cry*,' you just might find yourself crying from memories of brighter days.

Hailing from the richly diverse Richmond, VA music scene, **Justin Golden**'s new album, ***Golden Country: Volume 1*** (Vocal Rest Records ★★★★★) – *Volume 2* is coming later this year) – is a glorious exploration of the hazy dividing line between the blues and bluegrass. Golden is able to easily demonstrate the Black roots of bluegrass, working from the bedrock of the country blues that he knows so well, blending it with Appalachian roots. He's joined by some ace players like bluegrass mandolinist Trey Hall and blues harmonica player Andrew Alli, and the whole album just romps along in the most delightful way. Though Golden's been pinned down as a blues musician, this is the music he loves, the old barn dances and house parties of Southern America before the blues and country were split apart.

New Orleans *chanteuse* **Cyrille Aimée**'s equally diverse background is on full display on her new album, ***à Fleur de Peau*** (Whirlwind Recordings ★★★). It's a blend of her Dominican heritage and her childhood in the French city of Samois-sur-Seine where she wandered the famed local jazz *manouche* festival at a young age. Her new songs are silky smooth, wavering between velvety R&B, New Orleans brass blasts, rippling synth and bass, and Big Easy jazz crooning. She sings in English, Spanish and French, built the album between New Orleans, Costa Rica and New York City, and pulls it all off with a deep confidence and an easy sense of charm.

and-fiddle duo Evan Morgan and Courtney Werner rooting their music in Southern working class old-time traditions, most explicitly on album opener, 'A Dance on a Sunday Night'. An infectiously melodic frolic based on tunes originally recorded by West Virginia fiddler Edden Hammons, it's the sound of Woody Guthrie freight-hopping with the Penguin Cafe Orchestra. But, like fellow NC natives Nathan Bowles, Sarah Louise and Sally Anne Morgan, the Tubers are at their most engaging when toying with established Appalachian idioms, dismantling them into impressionistic sketches pregnant with pause and silence ('The Hermit's Passage'), introducing global dialects (check *rebetiko*-style lament, 'The Long-Suffering', boasting some breathy mournfulness courtesy of local legend Crowmeat Bob's snaking sax and clarinet) or incorporating non-musical elements (the evocative creek-side field-recordings of 'Water Dripped Upwards', captured on a spooky night out in the wilds). Such moments reveal Magic Tuber Stringband as worthy successors of another North Carolina tradition, that of highly influential arts institution Black Mountain College and the liberating, often transcendent, musical experiments of its former tutors, John Cage and Lou Harrison.

SPENCER GRADY

TRACK TO TRY *The Hermit's Passage*

The Taj Mahal Sextet
Swingin' Live at the Church in Tulsa

Lightning Rod

★★★☆☆

Now in his 80s, Taj Mahal is the grand old man of American roots music and follows 2022's old-timey *Get On Board* with Ry Cooder with a set recorded before a live audience at the late Leon Russell's Oklahoma studio known as The Church. Backed by bass, drums, lap steel and dobro and with singer Trey Hensley sharing vocals, the ten songs range across the multiple genres Taj has explored during an adventurous career that has seen him release more than 40 albums. There's trad blues on 'Betty and Dupree' and 'Mailbox Blues' (the latter of which he first recorded exactly half a century ago) and southern country-soul on 'Lovin' in My Baby's Eyes'. 'Queen Bee', which has been in his repertoire most of his life and which he famously recorded on 1999's *Kulanjan* with

Sasha Pedro

Toumani Diabaté, is revived and given a joyous Caribbean lilt. Other highlights include the slack key instrumental 'Twilight in Hawaii' and a ten-minute blues jam on T-Bone Walker's 'Mean Old World'. Elsewhere there are touches of Cajun, gospel, R&B and jazz, all blended into his own uniquely seamless vision of the music of the Black Diaspora.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

TRACK TO TRY *Queen Bee*

Arthur Melo
Mirantes Emocionais

Wonderfulsound

★★★★½

Melo, a young Brazilian composer, guitarist and singer, with his band O Ministério da Consciência, presents his take on not so much post-*tropicália*, but contemporary MPB, that has been informed by hypnagogic pop with some dashes of psychedelia. Melo by name and mellow by nature, *Mirantes Emocionais* (Emotional Viewpoints) offers some seriously laid-back music bathed in 70s effects; on 'Dama da Noite' I could even detect brief flourishes of a yacht rock lick. Maybe you remember that atypical but utterly beguiling Black Sabbath track 'Planet Caravan', where Osbourne used a rotating Leslie speaker to sound like he was '*floating through the universe*'? Well, Melo uses a similar effect to give an otherworldly feel to his vocals. On 'Zói Fundo' he manages to sound distant and almost disengaged, and on 'De Toda Sorte' he positively flies off into space. 'Do Colostro ao Osso' picks up the pace with its bass lead, cut in the vein of 90s indie by Pavement or The Breeders while 'Saidas' is a delightfully lush way to (almost) close with a yearning *bossa nova* in the style of peers Sessa and Bruno Berle.

ANDY CUMMING

TRACK TO TRY *Na Avenida com Benito*

TOP OF THE WORLD TRACK 4

Leyla McCalla
Sun Without the Heat

ANTI-

★★★★½

New Orleans-based Leyla McCalla is known for making moving, socially conscious music that takes in all her various influences, from Haitian roots to Americana. *Capitalist Blues* (2019) was a protest album, inspired in part by the rise of a certain man-sized Cheeto to the American presidency, and her last album, 2022's *Breaking the Thermometer* told the brutal story of the journalists of Radio Haiti who risked everything to deliver the news in Haitian Creole.

Her fifth album, *Sun Without the Heat*, still tackles urgent issues – largely drawing lyrical inspiration from Black feminist thinkers like Octavia Butler and Alexis Pauline Gumbs – but there's also levity. "I like when music feels urgent," McCalla says, "but I also wanted the new album to be playful and fun." And indeed, tracks like 'Scaled to Survive' and 'Love We Had' feel summery and bright.

But just like the album's delightful title-track suggests, we can't have light without dark, so there is still a vein of heaviness that balances out the playfulness. 'Tree', about a woman who turns herself into a tree because she worries no one will ever love her, ends with a particularly anxiety-inducing crescendo of psychedelic fuzz.

McCalla's music palette has broadened on *Sun Without the Heat* as well. There's Brazilian samba, touches of Afrobeat and even some Ethiopian folk as well as her usual Haitian and Americana fare. Another excellent offering from an ever-evolving artist.

ALEXANDRA PETROPOULOS

TRACK TO TRY *Scaled to Survive*

Mexican Institute of Sound
Algo-Ritmo: Mexican Institute of Sound Hits 2004-2024

Soy Sauce

★★★★½

Chris Scheurich

This compilation of 24 songs spans the two-decade career of Mexican Institute of Sound, aka Camilo Lara. Named as one of the 50 most influential people in Latin America by Spanish newspaper *El País*, Lara has become known as one of the region's most prominent artists fusing traditional Latin sounds with the global world of electronic music.

Algo-Ritmo highlights his musical progression since 2004, from early home-recorded tracks like the hip-hop-influenced 'El Micrófono' and sampladelic 'Mirando a las Muchachas' to his more ambitious, later works, while always staying loyal to his own brand of Mexican electronica flair. Which he does with some serious range, from the *mariachi*-inspired 'My America is Not Your America (feat Graham Coxon)' to Mexican *marimba* anthem 'Tipo Raro' to the electronic *cumbia* 'Stop! (feat Ceci Bastida)' with sprinklings of punk, rap and ska throughout.

Through his production work, and increasingly with Mexican Institute of Sound, Lara has become a prolific collaborator, with La Perla, Gaby Moreno and Esteman all featuring here. He's also been gaining a solid reputation for his film work, working closely with Disney on their sountrack for *Coco*, ensuring they represented Mexican music adequately. 'Jalale', his song for the soundtrack, represents that project.

From MIS anthems like 'México', 'Es-Toy' and 'Cumbia' through the smoother sounds of 'Bolero' and lesser-known album cuts like 'Hiedra Venenosa' that are well overdue another listen, there's something for everyone here, whether die-hard fans or new to the Institute.

JENNA MACKLE

TRACK TO TRY *Bolero (feat Foudeqush & Esteman)*

Claudia Meyer
La Negra – Tribute to Mercedes Sosa

Kobbiprod Productions

★★★★½

Claudia Meyer's fourth solo album is a tribute to Argentinian folk singer Mercedes Sosa, affectionately known as '*La Negra*'. Meyer's renditions convey the respect and affinity she has towards Sosa's lyrics, which were sourced from folk singer-songwriters Violeta Parra, Silvio Rodríguez and Atahualpa Yupanqui, among others. The album opens with the timeless 'Gracias a la Vida', a well-covered Latin American song. It's followed by 'Siempre en Ti' featuring a duet with Sosa herself – accomplished by merging Sosa's voice from a 1991 recording – where Meyer creates a proximity and intimacy so typical of *La Negra*. The track 'Alfonsina y el Mar' features a poignant duet with late Belgian singer Maurane, included here as a homage to both Sosa and Maurane.

Meyer's interpretations are faithful to the original live versions, accompanied by *charango*, guitar, *cuatro* and the *bombo* (Andean drum) with Marc 'Marquito' Benabou on percussion. The mellow and lyrical instruments blend with Meyer's voice to grace us with a modern presentation of the songs that Mercedes Sosa made famous around the world decades ago. Even those who don't speak Spanish will feel a deep connection to this beautiful and soothing album. The language of poetry knows no barriers.

SILVIA ROTHLISBERGER

TRACK TO TRY *La Maza*

Americas REVIEWS

Charlie Parr
Little Sun
Smithsonian Folkways

★★★★★

Austin, Minnesota's Charlie Parr is leaving behind the country-blues derivations of his earliest works. For all their ramshackle charms, albums such as *King Earl* and *When the Devil Goes Blind* reverently threw back to Delta giants such as Bukka White and Mississippi John Hurt, allowing only scant glimpses of the personality behind their creation. But Parr's move to Smithsonian Folkways has seen him shift incrementally, and perhaps ironically given that imprint's stock-and-trade, from the traditions which initially inspired him to reach for a guitar, towards a more idiosyncratic version of himself. On 2021's sublime *Last of the Better Days Ahead*, and now with *Little Sun*, Parr has established himself as a distinctly enigmatic chronicler of blue-collar bucolics, fusing honky-tonk hullabaloo and stargazing folk balladry, delivered in singular style with customary honesty and verve. Lead single 'Boombox' bustles with clanky resonator slide and Asher Fulero's tinkling ivories; the *raga*-like 'Bear Head Lake', a striking pantheist meditation where skyline and shoreline meld, is redolent of a lost Robbie Basho side, while best of all is 'Pale Fire', featuring Anna Tivel's tender vocals and Parr's quivery warble, kindled by guitarist Marisa Anderson's fulsome tones glistening like a field full of fireflies. Yet, for all its ambition and ornamentation, *Little Sun* is never indulgent or flash, the introduction of additional colourings serving, rather than stifling, the convivial drawl of arguably America's finest living troubadour.

SPENCER GRADY

TRACK TO TRY *Pale Fire*

Slack Key 'Ohana
Hawaiian Cowboy
Pacific Records

★★★☆☆

"*Ohana*' is the Hawaiian word for 'family'. And slack key is a form of tuning and playing guitar developed in Hawaii, involving open tunings, strumming patterns and ornamental fingering on the fretboard. This album by a three-year-old San Diego-based group may be said to be more 'ohana than it is slack key. George Kahumoku Jr, a virtuoso guitarist in the Hawaiian style and an impresario of tradition, makes a brief appearance on the title-track, alongside another guest, ZZ Top's vocalist and guitarist Billy F Gibbons, but neither Kahumoku nor the group's two lead guitarists get to showcase much slack key per se. However, there's plenty of 'ohana thanks to the Witkin family, with Brian Witkin – co-founder of the ensemble, standard and lap steel guitarist and co-songwriter of several tracks – and three other Witkins on various instruments and vocals. Kamaka Mullen, the other co-founder of Slack Key 'Ohana and principal songwriter, is of Hawaiian descent and speaks and sings the language fluently, serving as the group's lead vocalist and Hawaiian lyricist, as well as a guitarist. *Hawaiian Cowboy* does live up to its title in showcasing the kinship between country-and-western and Hawaiian music, perhaps more apparent in the twangy deployment of lap steel and pedal steel (by Rand Anderson) and ukulele (Carol Witkin and guest Brittni Paiva) than in Mullen's slack key. Kamaka Mullen and Brian Witkin have penned some delightful fusions in this, their second Slack Key 'Ohana album, which also shows their skills in creating sunny, harmonised delights the Beach Boys would have been proud of.

JEFF KALISS

TRACK TO TRY *Slack Key 'Ohana*

Charlie Parr

Ana Tijoux
Vida
Victoria Producciones

★★★☆☆

Vida is Ana Tijoux's first album in a decade. That does not mean the Chilean rapper was hiding from the spotlight. In fact, *Vengo* (2014) brought her to the forefront of global hip-hop, spreading to the world music arena. In the meantime, singles like 'Pa Que' (2020) pointed to a more traditional exploration, 'Rebelión de Octubre' (2020) with MC Millaray hinted towards a poppier sound, 'Antifa Dance' was built over a compelling Latin electronic rhythm. But Tijoux was still testing waters, reflecting on what she wanted to put out as a whole album.

Neither of those aforementioned tracks made it to *Vida*. After grieving her sister's 2019 death and focusing on raising her children, while also playing all over the world, Tijoux found the concept she wanted to explore in *Vida* (Life): known for her anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal stance, she now chooses happiness over revolt, life over death, signalling that standing for life is in itself an act of resistance, as it upholds dignity and humanity.

Yet some of the musical paths Tijoux was experimenting with previously are definitely here: the opener 'Millonaria' is a catchy rap tune with pop sprinkles, the stunning rhythm-heavy 'Niñx' infuses us with the bravery to fight for a world where every life is worth the same, 'Busco Mi Nombre' slows down to a ballad in a duet with iLe. The apex, however, is the final track, which sums up *Vida*'s concept, delivering it in a soft electronic joyous wrapping. On 'Fin del Mundo', Tijoux sings about the end of the world and how we should celebrate it dancing naked together.

She doesn't always get there, but when she hits the bullseye we truly believe revolution is just a song away.

GONÇALO FROTA

TRACK TO TRY *Fin del Mundo*

SONGLINES REVIEWS

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LATIN REISSUES
BY MARK SAMPSON

Sexteto Caracas
Ritmo y Sabor de Fiesta Con El...
El Palmas Music

★★★☆☆

An exuberant slice of '*salsa con guitarra eléctrica*' from late 60s Venezuela. The happy-clappy boogaloo of opener, 'Solo Para Ti', defines this entire *timbales*-powered party album.

Salsa Suprema
En la Conquista del Mundo Latino
El Palmas

★★★★☆

A bigger, horn-driven outfit – what distinguishes this 1979 album are the impassioned vocals of Larry Francia. A Venezuelan Héctor Lavoe, perhaps, who poignantly died last year, two days after signing with El Palmas.

Ghetto Brothers
Power-Fuerza
Vampisoul

★★★☆☆

From the Bronx's vibrant Puerto Rican community, Ghetto Brothers' 1972 release fuses Joe Bataan, Sly Stone and The Rascals in a raw, funky mix of scratchy guitar, catchy bass lines, busy percussion and endearing vocals. The eight tracks were recorded in one day and songs like 'Got This Happy Feeling' say it all.

Opa
Back Home
Far Out Recordings

★★☆☆☆

Also in New York, this Uruguayan migrant trio recorded the first of their three albums in 1975. *Back Home* was ultimately shelved. Despite moments like wickedly funky opener, 'Goldenwings', and 'African Bird"s glorious *candombe* rhythms, it's hard to shake the impression of a poor man's Azymuth.

Shelly Mosman

SAICOBAB
NRTYA

Thrill Jockey

★★☆☆☆

NRTYA is an easy record to celebrate but a difficult one to enjoy. The album fully realises its mission of drawing upon ancient traditions to make futuristic music. Yoshida Daikiti's *sitar* inspires a suite of punk-*raga* workouts which are enlivened by Motoyuki Hamamoto's *gamelan*-influenced percussion and rooted by Akita Goldman's bass. The X factor comes from Yoshimi, an artist and multi-instrumentalist with an uncompromisingly cool CV that includes her role as longtime drummer for Japanese rock band Boredoms and a collaboration with Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon.

Yoshimi's vocal contributions are in-your-face, breathlessly following Daikiti's rapid-fire sitar riffs and morphing into computer-voice stabs that form part of the percussive palette. 'Social This Dance' establishes a demented jig through a duet between Daikiti's sitar and a mysterious effect that might have been inspired by a dial-up modem. The sinister shanty devolves into a vocal-percussion tandem that sounds like the drummer is having a violent altercation with a duck. The raucousness becomes relentless over a whole album however.

We can all rejoice in knowing that our world makes space for odd creative people to engage in strange sonic experiments, such as SAICOBAB's *NRTYA*, even if we cannot fully embrace the results.

LIAM IZOD

TRACK TO TRY *Social This Dance*

Chiyomi Yamada & Baobab
Songs of My Land

Indigo Road

★★★★☆

A classical soprano with a decades-long career in early music, Chiyomi Yamada moved back to her native Japan in 2022, after years residing as a performer in Europe. Fascinated by Japan and Europe's historical musical exchange, Yamada has since initiated several projects that explore this connection, of which *Songs of My Land* is the latest, albeit heavily focussed on Japanese tradition. Arranged and recorded in collaboration with Japanese folk band Baobab – led by sibling multi-instrumentalists Maiko and Mirai Matsumoto, this release is a collection of ancient Japanese melodies, fused with European period instruments and a heavy influence from Celtic folk music. Opener 'Nagata No Komoriuta' is a lullaby from Kagoshima prefecture, underpinned by nylon-string guitar and gentle *taiko* drums. The arrangement of 'Muko Yokocho' centres Tsuyoshi Maeda's Celtic flutes, before segueing into an unmistakeably Celtic 12/8 rhythm. 'Gionshōja', a haunting a capella, is derived from the 13th-century epic story *The Tale of the Heike*, and expresses Buddhist concepts of change and impermanence. Engineered and co-produced by Jonas Niederstadt, the soundscape of this album leans into a sleek, accessible folk-pop, replete with ethereal vocal layering and lush instrumental arrangements, tied together by Yamada's arresting central vocal performance.

CHARLIE CAWOOD

TRACK TO TRY *Muko Yokocho*

SPICE RACK *EXPLORING MUSIC FROM SOUTH ASIA AND ITS DIASPORA*
by Dhruva Balram

After a year-long hiatus, Indian rapper **Prabh Deep** marks his return with a six-track EP, ***KING Returns***. It's a statement of intent from an artist whose ceiling is nowhere in sight. At the beginning of 2023, Prabh Deep delivered two seminal projects in *PRAA* and the deluxe version of *Bhram*. It felt like a moment signifying an artist, one of India's finest, coming to the peak of his powers. The releases also dropped after a whirlwind few years where the Indian hip-hop and rap scenes ballooned. Artists like Ahmer, Seedhe Maut, Badshah, DIVINE and Naezy shot into national attention. Labels and media sites dedicated to the genre cropped up. Suddenly, the genre was everywhere, and a movie titled *Gully Boy* (2019) was even made about this sudden rise.

But, what has always separated Prabh Deep from other artists in India is his bravery. Having taken a year to revisit his creative process and explore new avenues for his music, the fruits of that labour are born in the experimentation on this EP. Though there are moments of swagger, braggadocio and aggressive posturing on *KING Returns*, it's the soft intimate moments of introspection that make Prabh's work stand out. He doesn't appear to be making beats for the club or for other rappers to rap over. Instead, the production throughout is atmospheric and moody, as if they can only speak to Prabh in this current moment.

Renowned for his storytelling, Prabh Deep, who rose to fame in 2017 with his debut album, *Class-Sikh*, has pared back the vitriol and anger which existed with his early projects. Instead, he focuses on his lyricism and delivery while crafting meticulous production that showcases his ability to meld genres and instrumentation with aplomb. Last year, when Prabh was seemingly ready to take the throne of Indian hip-hop, he took a left turn and decided to go on a hiatus, the reasons for which the New Delhi-born rapper details on this EP. Opening track 'Yaadan' sees a slinky piano fit neatly behind solemn atmospheric production. Lyrically, Prabh discusses how music is an outlet for him to explore and make sense of his grief after the tragic passing of his father last year. 'Babaji' is a continuation of that conversation, but it sees Prabh embracing the value of the work he's created so far and reflecting on how he has gained confidence.

Within the first two tracks, Prabh Deep shows how – despite rapping in a wholly different language – he can have the listener viscerally feel what he needs. You don't have to understand what he's saying to feel the raw emotion in his voice, and that comes down to both his natural ability as a storyteller, and the beats he's creating. Throughout the self-produced EP he skates between sounds, never sounding disjointed.

On 'Girgit and 'Bachpan', he transports you to the streets of New Delhi with the latter, in particular, vividly detailing Prabh's childhood memories over a saccharine pop beat. Although lyrically and atmospherically it works, the production feels a tad unfinished, making for a disappointing end to an EP which otherwise marks the significance of a talent coming into his own. But, those bits of experimentation should be encouraged. This EP allows Prabh room for trial and error, to see what fits and what resonates with listeners.

Prabh Deep

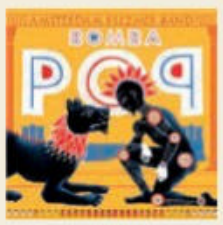
Over six tracks, the EP clocks in at 21 minutes and does exactly what it needs to do: it is a reflection of where Prabh is at this current stage of his career, showcasing his ability to experiment and do what he pleases. *KING Returns* solidifies a talent who has grown over the past few years, and developed a self-assured mentality, choosing to do things his way rather than conforming to industry standards.

TOP OF THE WORLD TRACK 9

Amsterdam Klezmer Band
Bomba Pop

Vetnasj Records

★★★★½



Amsterdam Klezmer Band are full of *chutzpah* — or, as the Dutch say, *gotspe*. Just two years shy of the project's 30th anniversary, with countless tours and concerts under their belt, AKB's 18th album, *Bomba Pop*, overruns with apparently boundless energy. This dynamism is familiar; AKB have always blown roofs off concert halls and sent audiences into frenzied dance.

Yet *Bomba Pop* also leans into new sonic directions, stretching the AKB sound and drawing on fresh influences. Klezmer, of course, remains at the project's core: music from Ashkenazi Jewish tradition, but deftly melded with other sounds as the septet join forces with Vienna-based producer Dunkelbunt (Ulf Lindemann).

Where much of AKB's previous music tends towards relatively subtle percussion (if used at all), many of these new tracks are driven by Dunkelbunt's electronic beats. 'Choices and Consequences' is propelled by drum'n'bass-inspired rhythms, underscoring boogaloo-like instrumentals, and the occasional squealing horn. Meanwhile, 'Bomba' channels mid-century American-Yiddish jazz (*à la* The Barry Sisters), with a pulsing electro-swing beat, bringing the song into the 21st century. The album, as a whole, incorporates a diversity of sounds: from reverberating dub to apocalyptic EDM-meets-*merengue*; from Istanbul-inspired psychedelic pop to the lilting, *cumbia*-influenced 'Do It in Amsterdam'. That track is an apt opener, bringing the album to life with an upbeat swirling, horn-led melody and lyrics that might suggest traditional Yiddish song ('*bimbidibam… woy-oy-oy-oy-oy*'), but quickly spins into a rap-esque celebration of Amsterdam. This is where AKB cut their teeth, busking in streets and cafés: '*We sing when we drink and we dance to the drum… That's how we do it in Amsterdam*'.

Other pieces retain a more traditional feel. 'Joey's Hora' is a beautiful example: a spacious, almost-eerie melody, eventually bursting into rapid, fiery dance. It's dedicated to Joël Chajes, brother of AKB founder-saxophonist Job Chajes. When Joël heard the song, he told Job: "The song starts slowly, I wake up and get my coffee. And at night, that's when my fire starts burning, and I'm at my best." The performers are also at their best; these are musicians of exceptional skill and intensity, possessing an ability to play together with the sensitivity and conviction that accompany decades of collaboration.

2023 was challenging, though, with the death of accordionist Theo van Tol in August. Amid party tunes, this album allows grieving space, closing with the profoundly moving 'The Journey and the Traveler', in which smatterings of human voice appear beneath a solemn, horn-based melody, before everything disappears into the howling wind.

Bomba Pop is busy, eclectic, rousing and fun. Fans of more traditional klezmer will find some reliable sounds here, but there are also discoveries to be made that should speak to whole new generations of listeners and dancers.

CELESTE CANTOR-STEPHENS

TRACK TO TRY *Joey's Hora*

Q&A
Job Chajes & Jasper de Beer

How do you channel live show energy into recording sessions?
CHAJES: I imagine partying, dancing people, intense atmosphere; that helps me incorporate the live feeling.
DE BEER: The urge to make people dance and have a great time pushes musicians to the next level. Playing together for more than 20 years gives the band a lot of experience and soul. We benefit from that in the studio. Dunkelbunt's ideas and producing skills also contributed greatly to the energy of this album.

Can you tell us about your relationship to klezmer and your movement towards other genres?
CHAJES: Klezmer is a very important influence, that's what we're best at. Music has to keep developing… and it sometimes floats away from the origin, but that makes it lively. Everything outside the borders of traditional klezmer lets us feel that distance, that friction and keeps our senses clear.

How do you perceive the connection between klezmer and Jewishness?
CHAJES: Jewishness has always been a part of our band, our heritage. For us that hasn't changed… In all the years that we [have existed] we [have seen] people coming together at our shows. People start dancing and cheering together, we feel connection and that is the message we keep bringing: people unite, we are all brothers and sisters!

L-R: Job Chajes and Jasper de Beer

Rene Nuijens

Julie Abbé
Out of the Ashes
Julie Abbé

★★★★½

Folk, blues, swing, world music and jazz combine to weave their trade winds across UK-based French singer Julie Abbé's fine second album. It's eclectic, beautifully performed, with a fine-sounding band that includes guitar, double bass, sax, clarinet and piano, as well as multi-instrumentalist Paul Johnson delivering the exquisite tones of the *bansuri* flute, the Catalan *gralla*, Balkan *kaval* flute, and *duduk*. He's prominent on the stand-out 'Mélusine' (a folkloric Lamia/mermaid figure), featuring the tones and drones of gralla, kaval and bansuri alongside Sam Quintana's double bass. Abbé's voice is a smoky delight, singing in French and English, and as well as the 'Mélusine', we encounter 'Medusa', wreathed in the soft airs of Johnson's bansuri and featuring Ewan Bleach's clarinet combined with James Grunwell's guitar – a perfect retinue for Abbé's voice of supplication, extended to a Medusa recast as a seductive rather than deadly feminine force, and as a spirit of renewal more than the bringer of death. The slow, oozy textures of 'Hushing the Blues Away' feels like a warm sound bath, the band of guitar, drums, clarinet and double bass coalescing into one sound, leaning close to your ear. Makes you want to lean in closer.

TIM CUMMING

TRACK TO TRY *Hushing the Blues Away*

Julie Abbé

A Lily
Saru l-Qamar
Phantom Limb

★★★★½

Shivers. Another manifestation of electro-ambient-music from the Global South. I had to think of Naujawanan Baidar's *Khedmat Be Khalq*, the collage of Afghan sounds that I reviewed recently. A Lily is a sobriquet of Phantom Limb's label head, James Vella, who has been releasing a range of records by the likes of Loraine James, WaqWaq Kingdom, Ami Dang, Hekla and Richard Skelton. Vella is of Maltese origin. For decades it was common for families in the Maltese diaspora to send tapes with the latest news to relatives back home. They featured sung messages formatted as a type of traditional Maltese song, *għana*. Vella assembled such recordings into a haunting aural landscape. Malta is a small island, but the soundscapes evoke vast mountains and deep ravines. The island has always been at the crossroads of histories, coveted by all the cultures surrounding it, and it has absorbed much from all such cultures. Maltese language has borrowed a lot from Arabic and a lot of the language related to the album reveals Arabic roots. *Qamar*, in the album-title *Saru l-Qamar* (They Became the Moon) is Arabic for moon. The title of the lead single 'Ħajti Kollha, Qalbi' (My Whole Life, My Darling) is close to colloquial Arabic, and it wouldn't be a surprise if għana was derived from the Arabic for song, *ughniya*.

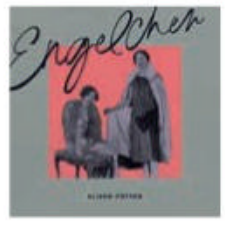
NEIL VAN DER LINDEN

TRACK TO TRY *Hajti Kollha, Qalbi*

Paul Blakemore

Alison Cotton
Engelchen
Rocket Recordings

★★★½☆



Alison Cotton's *Engelchen* is both a threnody and celebration, heartfelt, intense and deeply moving in its struggle through darkness to meet the light. The 'little angels' of the title are two sisters – Ida and Louise Cook – from Sunderland whose love of music took them across pre-war Europe, using their dilettante passion as a front to help dozens of people threatened by the Nazis to flee to safety. The opening 'We Were Smuggling People's Lives' – at 20 minutes, it's fully half of total playing time – is as intimate as it is epic – a cinematic elegy laced with menace and sorrow.

The six miniature episodes that follow find Cotton's vocals variously lauding the sisters' courage and fearing for their lives, with lurking threats forever haunting their secret endeavours. The title-track is as plaintively sweet as a Christmas lullaby; 'Crépuscule' a subtle re-working of a Massenet aria; 'Dolphin Square' a poignant portrait of the London safe house to which the Cook sisters brought their refugees. Especially evocative on *Engelchen* is the dolorous 'The Letter Burning' which drapes Cotton's a cappella vocals in dyspeptic drones, keening accordion, tremulous strings and synthetic sounds pregnant with remorse. It's an unsettling listen and often, in its rawness, an unbearable one. It's also a laudable tribute to quiet heroism.

MICHAEL QUINN

TRACK TO TRY *Engelchen*

Bégayer
Évohé Bègue
Murailles Music

★★★★½

Geographically, this mysterious quintet hail from the south east of France but, sonically, they manifest as though from a bustling interzone where diverse cultures and traditions, ancient and modern, slam up against each other, creating a dense, disorientating and positively post-apocalyptic hurly-burly.

Crazed percussion performed on muffled hand drums and North African iron *qaraqab* (metal castanets) provide a driving energy but largely eschew discernible metre, instead stirring up haphazard, tumbling polyrhythms that imply an implacable forward motion. Various pipes and flutes float over the top in a narcotised haze, suggesting at one moment a Moroccan market square, at another a jaunty Italian accordion *tarantella*. Vocal yelps, cries and moans – often scuzzed up with rough electronic treatments – summon the lofty *muezzin* as much as the rowdy street hawker. The effect of all this is profoundly trance-inducing, with *Évohé Bègue* drawing on the spiritual ecstasy of Gnawa as much as the white-out excess of lo-fi noise. ▸

Each track floats and bounces by as an unruly collage, guided by its own impenetrable logic and, indeed, the whole album seems to blend into one mind-melting visitation without borders. It's suis generis, 21st-century psychedelia at its most arresting and imaginative. Take a trip.

DANIEL SPICER

TRACK TO TRY *Grimpe une Pige*

Cara de Espelho
Cara de Espelho

Locomotiva Azul

★★★★½

No one by now can be ignorant of the far-right rise all over the world. In Portugal, the alarm is sounding just as the country is due to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution that put an end to the longest European dictatorship of the 20th century. That is the background for Cara de Espelho: re-enabling protest song in order to sing about tax havens, figureheads, mythifications of a country's grandiose history, misconceptions about immigration and political leaders that feed on the fear and resentment they spot around them.

As it was with Deolinda, Cara de Espelho are a vehicle for Pedro da Silva Martins' songs and lyrics. But they are also one of the most exciting bands one could dream of, as they gather members of Deolinda, Gaiteiros de Lisboa, Humanos, Ornatos Violeta and A Naifa. This means Carlos Guerreiro brings with him a bunch of traditional sounding self-invented instruments (central to 'Dr Coisinho'), Nuno Prata and Sérgio Nascimento add a rockier balance to the mix ('Testa de Ferro' and 'Político Antropófago'), Luís Martins does wonders with every sort of guitar ('Fadistão' and 'Genuinamente') and Mario Antónia 'Mitó' Mendes sings with her trademark style somewhere between *fado* and post-punk.

Throughout, this album presents Lisbon's sound as both traditional and contemporary – perfectly portrayed in 'Corridinho Português', 'Dr. Coisinho' and 'Fadistão' – making sure tradition is porous to every social shift.

GONÇALO FROTA

TRACK TO TRY *Corridinho Português*

TOP OF THE WORLD TRACK 6

David Murphy
Cuimhne Ghlinn: Explorations in Irish Music for Pedal Steel Guitar

Rollercoaster Records

★★★★★

Two worlds, two traditions, collide to enjoyable effect in David Murphy's long-playing debut, *Cuimhne Ghlinn*, its *Explorations in Irish Music for Pedal Steel Guitar* subtitle offering explanation enough of point and purpose. Treating tunes that stretch from the legendary Turlough O'Carolan into the present, it provides new evidence of Irish traditional music's seemingly endless facility to fuse with other idioms. If anything, we're knee-deep in the still-forming territory of Cosmic Country and Cosmic Americana, the Irish accent more often than not understated. Humming with its distinctively songful and keening 'twang', Murphy's evocative pedal steel voice is cosseted and couched in the subtlest of arrangements that variously incorporate harp, fiddle, *uilleann* pipes, cello, double bass, piano, trumpet and sensual, otherworldly electronic textures. Lead single 'Citi na gCumann' is a lament swathed in a synthesised, cotton-soft waltz. Like everything here, it's an exercise in mood-setting and understated emotions; the timeless 'Aisling Gheal' a sonic experiment of narcotic enchantment; 'Eleanor Plunkett' blossoming with old world charm in luminous modernity. Eloquent support from a dozen others, notable among them Anthony Ruby, Laura McFadden, Graham Heaney, Steve Wickham, Rory McCarthy, Alannah Thornburgh and Cory Gray, is deftly woven together by the self-producing Murphy.

MICHAEL QUINN

TRACK TO TRY *Citi na gCumann*

Fran & Flora
Precious Collection

Hidden Notes

★★★½☆

The London-based klezmer duo of cellist Francesca Ter-Berg and violinist Flora Curzon return with the follow-up to their 2019 debut *Unfurl*. It's another journey into the delicate, quirky and ethereal world of drones, discordant phrases and disparate traditions.

While the album is largely instrumental, both musicians also sing in Yiddish and down the strings to fiddle with bowed cymbals, extended piano techniques and found sounds. They are also joined by Simon Roth on Ukrainian *poik* (marching drum) and Ursula Russell on drums. The resulting menagerie of sound is at once modern, avant-garde and deeply traditional. There's an overall meditative quality, enhanced by the spare sound. This is not a wall-of-sound production. Instead the instruments are plucked out of a pervading silence.

Moving between North America, Eastern Europe and their UK home, they draw on archive recordings and old manuscripts like a pair of treasure hunters, repurposing to their own musical ends. It's certainly not chart-bait, but for the patient listener, there's a dreamy, half-remembered charm to the whole experience.

NATHANIEL HANDY

TRACK TO TRY *Fishelekh Gefinen – To Catch a Fish*

Mascarimirì
Cantano Gli Ucci

ARRA Produzioni

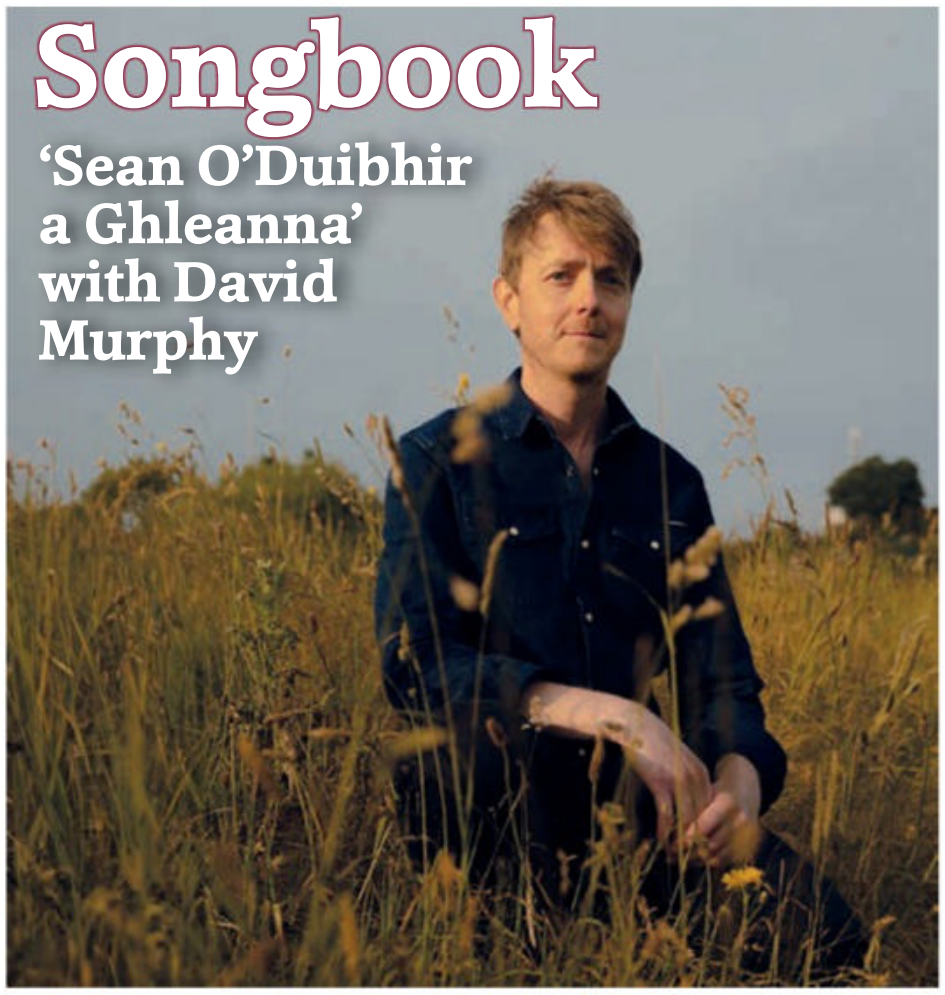
★★☆☆☆

Mascarimirì like to say they were born in a Salento '*not yet touristic*' and out of the union '*between tradition*

Celeste Burdon

Songbook

'Sean O'Duibhir a Ghleanna' with David Murphy



'Sean O'Duibhir a Ghleanna' (John O'Dwyer of the Glen) is an early Irish rebel song which has its origins in 17th-century history. The Sean O'Duibhir of the title is believed to be '*the third son of Dermot O'Dwyer of Clonyharp Castle*.' The O'Duibhir clan was one of many which fought and lost against Cromwell's annexation of lands in 1649-1653. These conflicts are at the heart of many versions of the song and, although Sean is said to have died in 1629, before the confiscations, his memory lived and lives on in this tune lamenting the loss of the old order. The glen of the title is thought to be the Glen of Aherlow.

The *Bunting Collection* (1796), compiled by folk collector and musician Edward Bunting, contains the oldest known record of 'Sean O'Duibhir a Ghleanna'. The lyrics appear here in Irish and in an English translation and reflect on the pleasure in nature that the O'Duibhir clan lost through Cromwell's confiscation. Other lyrics, however, also exist. Canon Sheehan (1852-1913) wrote his own words to the song, contemplating the Jacobite-Williamite war that occurred between 1689 and 91. His version contemplates the deciding battle of Aughrim in Galway (1961) when Catholic Jacobites (supporting King James) were defeated by William of Orange's Protestant army, ushering in an era of discrimination, oppression and persecution for the Catholic population. In Sheehan's rendering, too, O'Duibhir represents the old, defeated order.

Willie Clancy seems to be the first known to have recorded the tune on 1973's *The Pipering of Willie Clancy Vol II*. Since then, the likes of Planxty, Ríoghnach Connolly and Liam O'Flynn have all undertaken either the tune alone or the song.

David Murphy has joined them, recording the tune on pipes and pedal steel for his new album, *Cuimhne Ghlinn: Explorations in Irish Music for Pedal Steel Guitar*. Although Murphy's version is without lyrics, and takes its main inspiration from Liam O'Flynn, Canon Sheehan plays a role. The priest's writing connects the music to Murphy's home. "[At my] secondary school, there's a statue of [Sheehan] outside the gate… it's just a small area in North Cork where I grew up, a couple of villages." He continues, "[The Glen of Aherlow] is right on the borders of Cork and Tipperary and Limerick in the Munster region, which is where I'm from. I like the idea that [the tune] was something regional for me because some of the other tunes of the album were kind of scattered from around Ireland."

In Murphy's version, Anthony Ruby's *uilleann* pipes are to the fore, with Murphy's pedal steel gently supporting. A soundscape of drones and drawn-out notes builds until one can see the dawning, dark, bloody glen. Murphy explains, "I was trying to, I suppose, convey the horrors of the time. There's a kind of outro of the tune, it gets fairly experimental and noisy and it's kind of like a cacophony of noise and sound." He continues, "I was more focused on the melody, as well as the drones or the pipes. I treated the drones kind of separately, I put them through synth machines and I did the same with the pedal steel, just to create a huge sound, as big as we could, and to try and give it an epic treatment." His aim, in doing the tune alone, was to highlight both the melody and the versatility of the pedal steel. "It's not going to be rhythmic, but it lends itself well as a melodic and atmospheric instrument. And it was more that side of the music that I was trying to tap into."

It wasn't all straightforward. Murphy consulted *sean-nós* singer and member of The Gloaming Iarla Ó'Lionáird with the album's first draft. "He came back on this tune and he really liked it, but I had the arrangement slightly different. I had an ABABAA kind of a form to it and he was saying, 'No you can't do that… You have to get it right.' [It] transpired [that] Iarla's wife is Liam O'Flynn's niece and he was like, 'the pipers are going to kill you if you do this,'" Murphy grins and explains that a small edit was duly made.

Discussing the tune's long, revered life, we get to talking about its significance today. Murphy reflects, "I recorded it last summer so it predates all what's going on in the Middle East… [but] it's topical… It's a song about invasion and destruction and you know, terror… even though it's got a beautiful melody." Perhaps it's this true-to-life contradiction that keeps us coming back to it. *EMMA RYCROFT*

and innovation.' This means that for the past 25 years, the band have been reinterpreting the region's main musical traditions, the *pizzica* and *tarantella* rhythms, adding guitars (classical and electric), bass and drums and electronic elements to a music form that rests mostly in the hypnotic integration of voices and percussions, and is even said to cure spider bites (in the 15th-17th centuries, the frenzied dance was thought to be a means of expelling the poison of a tarantula).

After quite a stimulating experiment with electronic music in *NOU?* (2020), *Cantano Gli Ucci* (Sing the Ucci), finds Mascarimirì paying tribute to the Ucci – that is, '*the largest male traditional singing formation that existed in Salento (Puglia, Italy) in the 70s*.' But what we clearly learn listening to this new album is that Mascarimirì are more enticing when they keep 'modern' instruments to a minimum. One feels they try to modernise these songs beyond need. 'La Barca di Roma' is a good example of how bass and guitar excessively impose themselves on the repertoire, while the straight-ahead call-and-response of 'Pizzica Pizzica – Gli Ucci de Cutrofiano' or the dreamy vocals laid over a Mediterranean subtle instrumentation in 'Aria de li Trainieri' work much better.

Sometimes, innovation is a burden that weighs too heavy.

GONÇALO FROTA

TRACK TO TRY *Aria de li Trainieri*

Celeste Burdon

Monsieur MÂLÂ
Monsieur MÂLÂ

Bridge the Gap

★★★★½

Monsieur MÂLÂ, a Parisian jazz fusion quintet, emerges from the shadows of supporting roles for musicians like Blick Bassy, Mayra Andrade, Ibrahim Maalouf, and China Moses. Transitioning from accompanists to front and centre, Swaéli Mbappé, Yoann Danier, Nicholas Vella, Balthazar Naturel and Robin Antunes now take centre stage, collectively forming a group of stylistically diverse voices that enhance and enrich the compositions of each individual.

The eclectic ensemble boasts a distinctive lineup, featuring mandolin and violin alongside saxophone and synths. The self-titled album seamlessly navigates a spectrum of styles, incorporating everything from jazz, funk, traditional West African styles, samba, soul and pop. The cohesiveness of the record is remarkable considering the distinct styles of each member and how the record as a whole evolves dynamically from start to finish. 'All My Life' emerges as a dark soul number, heightened by the edgy, sumptuous vocals of Anna Kova, while 'Al Fayhaa' is quite simply a masterpiece, oscillating between softly-sung melodies and frantic, dissonant violin passages. ▸

Although it is composed, Monsieur MÂLÂ's passion for improvisation resonates throughout the record, infusing it with a sense of unpredictability and maintaining an ambient allure without fading into the background. A very impressive debut.

LUCY HALLAM

TRACK TO TRY: *Al Fayhaa*

Nils Økland Band
Gjenskinn

Hubro

★★★★★

Nils Økland has been at the heart of music-making in Norway for over 40 years. Rooted in Norway's traditional violin and Hardanger-fiddle music, his own compositions and improvisation work made him the go-to musician for ensembles working in jazz, contemporary and experimental music both at home and abroad.

The Nils Økland Band have been together for ten years, a remarkable gathering of outstanding musicians, all of them key figures across several ensembles. Even with a vast discography behind him, *Gjenskinn* is a good place to get to know Økland's musical depth and personality. His exquisite playing leads the way, sometimes bringing the beauty of past traditions alive, sometimes finding mysteries among the cobwebs of time, sometimes getting the soil of nature under his fingernails. From silvery tones to earthiness and grit to full-bodied whisky-gold magnificence, Økland continues to create new, compelling sounds. Attuned to his musicianship, the band members create beguiling textures: Rolf-Erik Nyström's saxophone brushstrokes, Håkon Mørch Stene's percussion palette drawing on far-away drums and magical vibraphones, long-term collaborator Sigbjørn Apeland's harmonium finding hymn-like harmonies and dance-floor urges, Mats Eilertsen's bass with a direct line to heaven.

Dance to 'Tilley Plump' or the Egyptian-inspired 'Kairo', or breathe in the other-worldly 'Lys' and discover *Gjenskinn*'s unforgettable journey.

FIONA TALKINGTON

TRACK TO TRY: *Minimalvals*

Lumpeks
Polonez

Umlaut Records

★★★★½

The second album by the Polish-French quartet Lumpeks picks up right where their self-titled debut (2020) left off. Founded by the French free jazz double bassist, Sébastien Béliah, the group deconstruct Polish traditional tripartite dances, mainly *oberek*, *mazurka* and *kujawiak* from Central Poland with an Ornette Coleman-like bravery and imagination. Sometimes Lumpeks play these tunes quite faithfully, changing only instrumentation – adding to the violin (played by Maria Stępień), an instrument crucial for Polish folk music, trumpets and saxophone (played recklessly and restlessly by Olga Kozieł and Pierre Borel, respectively) on songs such as 'Tête Deux Chevals' and 'Kujawiak Kombinowany'. On these two tracks, Lumpeks fully show their skill and craft – the music swirls and turns, inviting night-long dances. Oftentimes in *Polonez*, however, they improvise over the rhythmic pattern of oberek and build around it completely new, jazz-infused pieces. They really thrive when they balance those two approaches, as on the slower 'Le Souterrain' or 'Double Polka', where right when you think the music falls apart it jumps back on track. The main theme of the album is movement – be it forgetting oneself while dancing or travelling – embodied by fierce drumming from Olga Kozieł. Kozieł also sings. She has a powerful, raw voice with which she shares stories of love, patriarchy, violence and female courage.

MICHAŁ WIECZOREK

TRACK TO TRY: *Double Polka*

Nils Økland Band

Morten Spaberg

Polenta
Karkelo

Polenta Music

★★★½☆

Polenta is an odd name for a Finnish folk band. However, in Finnish '*polenta*' means 'stomp'. This youthful Helsinki quartet features violin, plus a pair of five-string fiddles and an acoustic guitar. Violinist Olli Sippola doubles on mandolin. Polenta's first album *Kaustinen Turbo* addressed the tunes of folk fiddle pioneer Konsta Jylhä, but this second release concentrates on the band's original tunes, although these still sound heartily traditional. Their melodies are distinctive, with a forcefulness to the delivery and finesse in the detail. The layered fiddles lend a massed singing sound, with Mikko Malmivaara's guitar as a driving force. Strangely, some of the purposeful bowing sounds like it's descended from the work of Michael Nyman. 'Sippolan Ollin Katrilli' has a solo fiddle spotlight, and 'Polska Polun Varrelta' is much slower than expected, while 'Ikkuna' opens as a guitar/mandolin ballad, fiddles later providing sweeps of colour. Happiness and positivity override any possible morose moments, but 'Ykköspolska' has a darker dramatic thrust.

MARTIN LONGLEY

TRACK TO TRY: *Ykköspolska*

Topette!!
ON – Live at the Jam Jar

Topette!!

★★★★½

A '*topette*' is a shot of liquor. In Poitou-Charentes, where the band met, it means 'Cheers!'. Topette!! is thus the perfect name for this French/English outfit. Their music,with the invigorating punch of a double tot, is cheerful, welcoming – a sonic hug.

The English contingent, Andy Cutting, Barn Stradling and James Delarre, provide pumping melodeon, powerful bass and sparking fiddle; the French, driving rhythms from Tania Buisse's *bodhrán* and Julien Cartonnet's squally bagpiping and banjo-picking of remarkable velocity.

ON – Live at the Jam Jar is Topette!!'s celebration of a decade together. It's the band recorded in full flight at a favourite venue in Bristol;

14 tracks of instrumental *bourées*, jigs, polkas, traditional songs and original compositions.

'Bourée Morvandelle' lifts proceedings off with Cutting's squeezebox rhythmically respiring before Stradling's acoustic bass guitar kicks in and Cartonnet's pipes come squealing over the top. In 'Polka Know' there are pauses when you can almost see dancers picking up and swinging their partners before the lovely tune hops on. 'Pot Neuve' is a tour de force melding of bodhrán and pipes. The sound grows even richer when, on the later tracks, Romain Chéré and Antoine Turpault step up, bringing more pipes and another squeezebox. It would have been great to have been jammed into The Jam Jar that night but with *ON* we can share the music – and something of the atmosphere.

JULIAN MAY

TRACK TO TRY: ***Pot Neuve / De La Flamme***

La Viu-viu
Flexūs

Segell Microscopi

★★★☆☆

This album was apparently inspired by labyrinths, whether '*imagined… astronomical… constructed… danced [or] natural…. and especially the mineral labyrinth of Roca Viva*' – a '*magic labyrinth of paths [and] worked rocks*' that can be found between Cerdanya and Alt Urgell, on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees. All of which offers some indication of the ideas behind this latest set by La Viu-viu, an engaging and experimental acoustic band from Catalonia. The four members play a remarkable variety of instruments, including accordion, clarinet, hurdy-gurdy, whistle, bagpipes, violin, guitar and the double bass that holds many of their ever-changing compositions together. There are folk influences here, along with melodies that could be cartoon themes, jaunty passages that veer towards jazz, and brooding pieces that suddenly turn into a dance workout. The music indeed twists and turns like a labyrinth but always sounds totally controlled, as different instruments suddenly emerge to take the lead. Most of the album is instrumental, but there are vocal passages, as on 'Sorginak Infernuko Hauspotik Irtetzen', which is like a furious folk dance. Elsewhere on *Flexūs* they offer a thoughtful lament for the Minotaur (who was imprisoned in a labyrinth) in 'La Solitud del Minotaure'. A charmingly quirky set.

ROBIN DENSELOW

TRACK TO TRY *La Solitud del Minotaure*

Meril Wubslin
Faire Ça

Les Disques Bongo Joe

★★★★☆

Meril Wubslin's fourth album, born from a crossroads between Brussels and Lausanne, unfolds as a captivating sonic odyssey. Recorded at Kwake Bass' Studio in London, the trio – Christian Garcia-Gaucher, Valérie Niederoest and David Costenaro – continue to push musical boundaries and provoke with rhythmic loops, inquisitive guitars and deep vocal harmonies.

The album commences with 'Un Calme' introducing unsettling distortions and drum beats that evolve into monotonous guitar loops and vocals. 'Tout est Curieux' evokes feelings of a slow march with a deep vocal harmonic hum of past narratives. 'Grands Espaces' triggers feelings of a melodic meander across the vast open plains, caressed by a burning wind, while 'La Main' guides listeners into a trance with drums and piano. 'Les Pensées' offers more looped guitar and whispered thoughts, sustaining the album's intrigue. The album concludes with 'L'eau Monte' portraying rising flood waters, amid deep-diving vocals and strings and percussion that could feel at home in North Africa.

Meril Wubslin's musical venture remains on course, delivering a nine-track album that feeds the curious, offering a harmonious blend of diverse inspiration and captivating encounters.

BUZZ BURY

TRACK TO TRY: ***Grands Espaces***

Eddie Lee

FOLK *ENGLAND, IRELAND, SCOTLAND & WALES*
by Tim Cumming

Leonard Barry

She won last year's BBC Radio Scotland Young Traditional Musician of the Year award at Celtic Connections, and **Amy Laurenson**'s ***Strands*** (Amy Laurenson ★★★) draws the strings on melodies from '*Shetland, Scandinavia, Mainland Scotland and Ireland.*' It's a set of tunes that combines piano, guitar, double bass and *bodhrán*, alongside piano and guitar duos and solo piano pieces. She's a brilliant player, inventive and finding the pulse across a range of improvisations, as her music tells a story of sorts, beginning in her native Shetland, and encompassing contemporary and classical inflections rising out of those trad roots. Check out 'Da Trowie Burn' for some stunning solo work.

Mike McGoldrick produces *uilleann* piper **Leonard Barry**'s ***Littoral*** (Leonard Barry ★★★★), his third solo album, its title (meaning '*on the shore*') a nod to the atmospheres of Barry's coastal home town of Kilmoyley in North Kerry, and his current home in Sligo. It's his first solo set in more than a decade, drawing on waltzes, slides and jigs from Kerry, Sliabh Luachra and Sligo, mixed with contemporary pieces. McGoldrick guests on flute, with fiddlers Kevin Burke and Andy Morrow, guitarist Shane McGowan, cellist Alice Allen, Seamie O'Dowd on guitar, and Michael Holmes on *bouzouki*. The likes of the solo 'Aisling Ghael' show Barry at gloriously full spate.

Orkney fiddler **Louise Bichan**'s second album, ***The Lost Summer*** (Adhyâropa Records ★★★) features her own tunes alongside traditional pieces such as 'Deltingside / Squirrel Hunters' and those from friends including fellow Orkney fiddler Jennifer Wrigley, whose 'The Watch Stone' is a beauty of a tune. She is accompanied by a core band of guitars, mandolin and cello, with guest turns from the likes of pianist Jennifer Austin, and Simon Chrisman's beautifully-placed hammered dulcimer on 'Deltingtide / Squirrel Hunters'. Her tune 'Adam and Erics' and the beautiful elegy 'Tune for Claire' are highlights of a fine set that's from the tradition but fully contemporary.

Recorded live with no edits, no overdubs, Irish flautist, soundtrack artist and member of the London-Irish group CrossHarbour, **Philippe Barnes** and a longtime musical companion, pianist **Tom Phelan,** present ***The Clearwater Sessions*** (Tom Phelan & Philippe Barnes ★★★), which features selections of Irish and Scottish tunes alongside self-penned pieces. The playing is exemplary, with feel, rather than speed, set as their priority, from the opening 'Clearwater Waltz' through the mysteriously titled 'Midnight Accountant' to the standout air, 'Blackbird', with Barnes exchanging silver flute for whistle on 'Ali's Reel', before he and Phelan raise the pipe tune 'Hag at the Spinning Wheel' between them, and close the album with the penultimate lovely solo flute piece, 'May Morning Dew'.

Naomi Berrill's cello takes on a range of characters and states of being across **The Naomi Berrill Trio**'s ***Inish*** (Casa Musicale Sonzogno ★★★), an album inspired by Inishark and Inishbofin, two islands off the west coast of Ireland where beauty and hardship combine for the souls who've lived and carved out a living there. These dichotomies are reflected in the music, with its mixing currents of folk, classical and jazz. Berrill is joined by producer, guitarist and vocalist Lorenzo Pellegrini, and drummer and cellist Andrea Beninati, whose restless percussive figures are a contrasting match for the innovative means that Berrill brings to her playing, and to her compelling, layered vocals and lyrics.

Middle East REVIEWS

Ramzi Aburedwan & Dal'Ouna Ensemble
Oyoun Al Kalam

Riverboat Records

★★★★½

Originally recorded in 2007, *Oyoun Al Kalam,* by multi-instrumentalist Ramzi Aburedwan & Dal'Ouna Ensemble finally gets a digital release 17 years later. This album of poetic songs and instrumentals from the Middle East region is made up of original compositions and was the first of the group's four records. It features soaring vocals by '*Oday Al-Khatib and Noura Madi, both young refugee students of the Al-Kamanjati music school that Ramzi founded.*' Though it is a traditional album in terms of instrumentation, it also very much feels contemporary, because music as good as this will always have a timeless quality. The opening track, 'Idha Al Shamsi' sets the tone of intricate *oud* playing that really showcases Aburedwan's mastery of the instrument. 'Tayara' is a story of a kid dreaming of being able to fly. The ten-minute instrumental opus, 'Mandira Hijaz' is another example of multi-instrumentation featuring the oud, accordion, percussion, viola and *buzuq* that you never want to end. *Oyoun Al Kalam* is a pleasant listen but it also requires full attention as this is music that stirs emotions and heightens the senses.

YOUSIF NUR

TRACK TO TRY *Tayara*

A.G.A Trio
Araxes

Riverboat Records

★★★½☆

These tunes are steeped in sadness, arriving from Anatolia, Georgia and Armenia, the homelands of each band member. This is the trio's second album, featuring Mikail Yakut, whose accordion lies at the centre, like a small orchestra, flanked by the soft-blowing Arsen Petrosyan (*duduk*) and Deniz Mahir Kartal (*kaval*). The double-reed woodwind and end-blown flute complement each other on each side of the stereo field. Kartal also plays the *divan*, a hybrid developed from the *saz* lute. Introverted and expressive, the performance exposes each instrument, but the combined presence of the three still creates a surprisingly full spread of sound. The compositions are contributed by all three members, sometimes involving an instrument leaning forward to glow individually, the emphasis changing from tune to tune. 'Dark Elf' has a slow sway to its melancholic celebration, then 'Dancing Horses' has a robust, percussive melody. The accordion is restful on 'Wind of Araxes', the duduk and divan highlighted during its slow, mournful development. The most up-tempo prancer of *Araxes* is 'Kavkasiuri' (Caucasian), followed by a closing dance that is known by different names in each of A.G.A.'s three native lands.

MARTIN LONGLEY

TRACK TO TRY *Wind of Araxes*

TOP OF THE WORLD
TRACK 2

Mohammad Syfkhan
I am Kurdish

Nyahh Records

★★★★½

Sometimes moments of grace spring from conflict in a way that feels like the premise for a film or a novel. The story of Mohammad Syfkhan is one of those moments. As the title of his debut album suggests, he is a Kurd, and therefore stateless in a sense, even before conflict came to his homeland.

Born in Syria, the singer and *buzuq* player founded the Al-Rabie Band in the city of Raqqa in the mid-80s. When civil war engulfed his country, and one of his sons was killed at the hands of the Islamic State, Syfkhan fled as a refugee to Ireland. The moment of grace is in the coming together of two musical worlds: Syfkhan's Middle Eastern and North African-infused wedding and party music met the Irish session, and a kinship was felt.

These eight tracks include traditional numbers mixed with songs by Egyptian composer Baligh Hamdi, Kurdish Arabesk singer İbrahim Tatlıses, and the title-track by Syfkhan himself. He is accompanied on several tracks by fellow Leitrim musicians Eimear Reidy on cello and Cathal Roche on saxophone. Elegant and varied in pace, this is not simply dance music, but a rich accompaniment to your next *soirée*.

NATHANIEL HANDY

TRACK TO TRY *A Thousand and One Nights*

Süeda Çatakoğlu
Süeda Sings Sezen Aksu

Ahenk Müzik

★★★★½

Sezen Aksu: an unconventional contemporary female public figure in Turkey, for half a century she commented with her songs on the evolution of society, reflecting its changes and innovating its popular music. Composer and lyricist, she's penned tunes beloved by generations of listeners, and still relevant today.

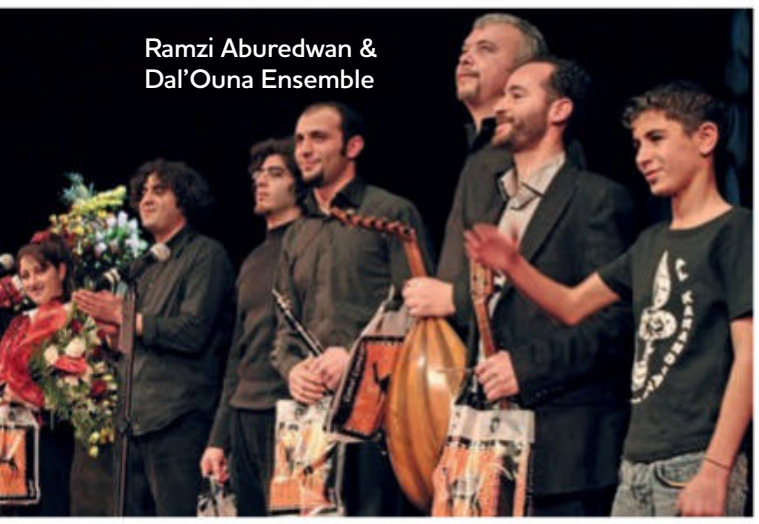
Süeda Çatakoğlu (b1997), student at Berklee College of Music in Boston, US, was accompanied by Sezen's songs in her long travels across Turkey first, then Europe and now to the US. She started to sing them live, as part of her act, then developed the idea into a full-fledged tribute album. Her own spare arrangements set off the colours of her voice against a rotating background band involving some Turkish musicians and some colleagues at Berklee. She treats the songs with creativity and empathy, from the sentimental to the sarcastic and even gloriously celebratory, not trying to imitate the original delivery, accompanying herself on piano in a contemporary idiom that never loses the melodic flow. Sinan Cem Eroğlu's contributions on fretless guitar are always appropriate. A special highlight is 'Dansöz Dünya' which gets a stunning India-themed reworking that finds new meanings in its lyrics and music.

FRANCESCO MARTINELLI

TRACK TO TRY *Dansöz Dünya*

Caroline Minshall

Middle East REVIEWS



Bahareh Fayazi & Asareh Shekarchi
Nasim-e Sahar

Little Axe Records

★★★★½

Nasim-e Sahar, featuring the duo of Bahareh Fayazi on *tar* and Asareh Shekarchi on *tombak* and *avaz* (Iranian classical singing), is a unique reinterpretation of works by master Iranian vocalist Reza-Qoli Mirza Zelli (1906-1945). Renowned for his exceptional vocal technique and command of *tahrir* – an oscillating falsetto vibrato often compared to Swiss yodelling – Zelli tragically passed away from tuberculosis in Tehran around the age of 38. Given the poor quality of recordings from this period, Zelli's performances can't be heard to their full potential, leading to Fayazi and Shekarchi's current recreation. What started as a musical rite of passage – copying prior performances by ear being a core part of learning Iranian music – became a meticulous reinvention, with the duo respectfully iterating upon the finer details of Zelli's delivery. As such, the recording is a masterful presentation of classical Iranian music, with Shekarchi's undulating voice pirouetting over Fayazi's virtuosic tar accompaniment. It is also significant that, in a tradition historically dominated by male performers, such an elevation of the art form is presented by two female artists – both of whom are teachers themselves at the Girl's Music Conservatory in Tehran – representing a future for Iranian music that reinvents and improves upon its past.

CHARLIE CAWOOD

TRACK TO TRY *Tasnif-e Nādideh Rokhat*

Farah Kaddour
Badā

Asadun Alay

★★★½☆

Farah Kaddour's inaugural solo venture, *Badā*, unfolds as a deliberate exploration of the *buzuq*, a Persian lute akin to the Greek *bouzouki* or Turkish *saz*. Kaddour is a researcher, educator and musician hailing from Beirut, Lebanon. *Badā* showcases her technical prowess as a buzuq player, drawing on her wealth of experience in folk and classical Arabic music through this sparse but purposeful album.

The intentional minimalism of *Badā* serves to cast the buzuq into the spotlight, offering a rare solo perspective on the instrument, accentuated by Kaddour's distinctive position as a female player in a male-dominated realm. The album's strength lies in its personal and virtuosic expression, featuring primarily improvised pieces along with a traditional composition ('Bulbul el-Afrāh') and the original 'Madd ou Jazr'. Collaborating with percussionist Ali El Hout on the latter, the addition of the Persian *daf* makes for a captivating track. 'Taraddud' is another highlight, showcasing a percussive, rhythmic strumming style reminiscent of Rodrigo y Gabriela at times.

In contrast to Kaddour's experimental sextet SANAM, *Badā* feels more like an ethnomusicological study than an innovative musical endeavour – an almost academic approach, not so surprising given her educational background. Nevertheless, the album's significance lies in its contribution to the buzuq repertoire, making it a noteworthy release.

LUCY HALLAM

TRACK TO TRY *Madd ou Jazr*

AO Music
Otherness

Abbeywood Records

★★★☆☆

Imagine yourself watching a performance where musicians perform a kaleidoscope celebrating world traditions, including multi-lingual voices, sometimes mysteriously inserting newly formed words made from different phonetics, and you might now have a picture of AO Music's seventh studio album, *Otherness*. Rich harmonies provided by soft synth sounds overlaid with choruses of voices and instruments from across the globe throughout the album merge to provide a truly East-meets-West effect. Predominant South Asian sounds, with a *bansuri* featured in the title-track, join *tabla*, harmonium and improvised vocals from Varijashree Venugopal in a warm embrace of India. In contrast, tracks like 'All is You' open out with water sounds and layers of vocals that instantly transport you to China and South-East Asia. Lyrics such as '*the world lives in your eyes*' bring English vocals into the mix, though at risk of being a bit cheesy. So, like a dream, the album washes over your ears with the unobtrusive blend of Western and Eastern. Perhaps like me though, for album seven, you might have wanted more. After the yellow glow of each track, the album feels a bit monochrome – perhaps more textural contrast is needed?

JAMES RORISON

TRACK TO TRY *Hero's Masquerade*

TOP OF THE WORLD TRACK 10

Mama Longhorn
Extinct But Still Alive

Soit Se Silti

★★★★★

This is Finnish music collective Mama Longhorn's fourth album in a 13-year career which has seen them acclaimed as among the most exciting outfits working in the country today. They hail from Pori, a city of some 80,000 inhabitants situated on the estuary of the Kokemäki River, famed for its jazz festival, theatre and live music scene. Pori's international cultural outlook has certainly seeped into Mama Longhorn, whose latest effort provides a fascinating mixture of Afrobeat rhythms, shuffling funk, explosive guitar and wistful, almost ambient soundscapes, all with a captivating exploratory edge.

Across tracks such as the wonderfully named 'Reappearing Rhino', this is a record which lures you into a deep and delicate trip-hop territory one second, before exploding the next, with beautiful brass, dissonant guitars and thumping drums, in an evocative, progressive rock adventure. Sonically, *Extinct But Still Alive* is balanced to perfection, with a wide open production allowing for suitably rough edges and leaving plenty of space for all the performers to shine. Singer Eeva Poijärvi's vocals, in particular, are utterly charming, free of histrionics and eminently versatile.

CHRIS WHEATLEY

TRACK TO TRY *Rowing High Rowing Low*

Bacao Rhythm & Steel Band
BRSB

Big Crown

★★☆☆☆

Bacao pan out of Hamburg, lending a Caribbean touch to rap hits, although some of these covers are somewhat mainstream selections (Drake, A$AP Rocky, 50 Cent). The steelpans of Trinidad and Tobago are expected to dominate, although in reality they're often more of a mood-flavouring. It's the beats and drums that are problematic here, often sounding, by turns, clumsy, stiff, straight or uncertain. Also, the beats are too high in the mix, compared to the pans. A slow pace is preferred throughout; a wooden attempt at funkin'. The best tunes are the Bacao originals, such as 'Hazy Memories', with its shimmering dub trundle, or 'Treasure Quest', evoking an uptempo spy theme, with a prominent electric bass guitar line. An odd number out is a reading of the 'Stranger Things Theme', with rippling pans lending mystery, twin guitars hovering and prickling. The best rap tune is 'Nuthin But a G Thang' by Dr Dre & Snoop Dogg, with the pans soloing and the bass throb dominant, both sides equal in strength. Overall, though, the hip-hop reworkings of labelmates El Michels Affair are preferable.

MARTIN LONGLEY

TRACK TO TRY *Hazy Memories*

Creation Rebel
High Above Harlesden [Box Set]

On-U Sound

★★★★★

Creation Rebel are pioneers of the UK dub scene. Emerging from working-class London in the late 1970s, their music stepped on untrodden ground, where spacious dub reggae met industrial experimentation and the punk influences of the surrounding zeitgeist. Their 1978 debut (*Dub from Creation*) also documented the beginnings of stalwart producer Adrian Sherwood's career, and anticipated the birth of his On-U Sound label. However, touring as Prince Far I's band, with six seminal albums under their own name, Creation Rebel came to a sudden halt: core member Keith 'Lizard' Logan was jailed for an incident involving HM Customs, and, in 1983, Prince Far I was killed. 40 years later, in October 2023, the band released their comeback (*Hostile Environment*) with Sherwood steadfast at the producer's helm, alongside a core of 'Crucial' Tony, Charlie 'Eskimo' Fox, Mr Magoo and myriad guests.

High Above Harlesden brings together the Creation Rebel story via six albums. The result is an opulent slice

Janne Alhonpaa

Oluko Imo

Oluko Imo

Oluko Imo / Black Truth Rhythm Band

Ifetayo; *Glory of Om*; *Anoda Sistem*; 'Oduduwa' [single]

Soundway Records

★★★★½

With the blessing of his widow, Soundway Records have re-released three landmark albums and a single from the much underrated Trinidadian bandleader Oluko Imo. His lack of fame – both in his native country and across the world – is fitting to his commitment to Marcus Garvey, anti-materialism and an authentic Black Power movement, made real in his move from Trinidad to Lagos after an instant friendship with Fela Kuti. The pair met in New York in the early 80s, Imo having honed his craft with jazz ensemble Black Truth Rhythm Band. Soundway's first release, Black Truth Rhythm Band's 1976 *Ifetayo*, showcases a masterful blend of calypso, Afrobeat and American jazz-funk at its wildest. It perfectly fits the global mood of revolution, a sonic kinship with Sun Ra coming across in Imo's Yoruba vocals and the urgent sense of misplacement. These are the kind of bass-heavy infectious beats that transcend borders, inspired more from what Imo felt in his ancestry than from a physical observed place.

After tour promises for Black Truth were not met, Imo travelled to Venezuela and then to New York, where he met Fela. A collaborative single, 'Were Oju Le (The Eyes are Getting Red)', is a vintage Afrobeat track recorded in Lagos in 1988, by now Imo's well-established home. The creeping keyboard loop and sparse finger-tapped percussion would make a perfect backdrop to a 70s Blaxploitation thriller. Reflections on Imo's post-colonial experiences of Trinidad and Nigeria come with his 1995 album *Glory of Om* (Soundway's third release), while Soundway's final release, 2001's *Anoda Sistem*, features Fela's son Seun in a slick parting gift.

Both these albums showcase something truly knockout. *Glory of Om*'s title-track and upbeat instrumental version is more calypso than Imo's other releases, perhaps evidence of him reconnecting with Trinidad. The result sounds like Congolese rumba with its jangled percussion and uplifting grooves. The album is big on steelpan, an instrument that carries huge importance in its slave rebellion origins. By contrast, *Anoda Sistem* – recorded just four years after Fela Kuti's death – is very much Afrobeat, with Seun undoubtedly trying to prove his right to lead Egypt 80 on the sultry 'City of Gate'. Tracks like 'Wake Up Call' and 'Tell Am' are politically hot, with Imo's growls and whoops matching the call-and-response vocals in a way that only Fela, or perhaps James Brown, could do better.

CLYDE MACFARLANE

TRACK TO TRY *Glory of Om* from *Glory of Om*

of sonic history. While firmly within the dub framework, the collection is diverse and endlessly engaging, drawing from an array of sounds, influences and studio experiments. Largely instrumental album *Dub from Creation* includes ticking drums that dissolve into echoing trails, and hypnotic basslines, reverberating beneath analogue effects, spluttering drum hits and bursts of melodica. *Close Encounters of the Third World* (1978), meanwhile, leans into vocal melodies, with sublime falsetto backings that reach a rocksteady-esque quality. Accompanying horn lines spin out of a rootsy dub that communes with the pit of the belly. Elsewhere, *Starship Africa* (1980) transmits from an otherworldly space, where extra-terrestrial voices meet backwards tape and clanging, alien percussion, while melodic bass and pulsing rhythms drive the record, gripping the ear. Other moments suggest post-punk, avant jazz, dancehall, politics (*Hostile Environment*, notably, references British anti-migrant policy) and beyond.

Ever-relevant, from honeyed vocals to deep space, any remotely dub-inclined listener will find depth, beauty and chills-inducing sounds in this crucial, captivating collection.

CELESTE CANTOR-STEPHENS

TRACK TO TRY *Joyful Noise* from *Close Encounters of the Third World*

EMEL

MRA

Little Human

★★★★½

Emel Mathlouthi is the Tunisian-American singer-songwriter and producer who drew the global spotlight with her passionate song 'Kelmti Horra' (My Word is Free), written in 2007, which became an anthem for the Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring after her (recorded) street performance for protestors in Tunis went viral. 17 years and four studio albums (and one remix and one live album) later, the NYC-based EMEL – just EMEL – has reconfigured her sound and her identity, distilling a wealth of disparate artistic and political influences into a persona, an imprint, of astonishing import. '*I want us to change the system from within, by and through women*,' she declares in the press release for *MRA* (a phonetic take on 'woman' in Arabic), and here she's as good as her word. Every single collaborator on *MRA* is a woman: producers, technicians, photographers, musicians. Female guest singers and rappers feature liberally across the album's 12 tracks, which meld everything from African trap to Arabic reggaeton, *batucada*, hip-hop and *chaabi* to juddering drum'n'bass. Malian rapper Ami Yerewolo spits fast-paced Bambara on 'Nar', among the contagious beats of which Emel sings '*I am a soldier / I am a bullet*' with crystalline fury; Ukrainian rapper Alyona Alyona assists in honouring immigrant workers on the alternately angelic and punchy 'Maurice'; 'Mazel' recalls the rape of a transwoman, assuaging the pain with delicate synths; 'Lose My Mind (feat Nayomi)' is whispered threat, a tempest of tempo changes, pure processed vocals and fierce scattergun Farsi. Genre-less and boundary-defying, *MRA* hits like a sucker punch. It won't be for everyone. But it is a game-changer.

JANE CORNWELL

TRACK TO TRY *Lose My Mind (feat Nayomi)*

Frank London's Klezmer Brass Allstars

Chronika

Borscht Beat

★★★½

After nearly 15 years playing trumpet in America's seminal klezmer band The Klezmatics (with whom he is still active), Frank London started the Klezmer Brass Allstars releasing their debut *Di Shikere Kapelye* (The Inebriated Orchestra) in 2000. Described on the CD as '*Jewish-Oriental Village Brass from NYC's Lower East Side*', it was an ebullient and irreverent blast. They teamed up with Serbia's Boban Marković Orkestar and an Egyptian brass band for their next release (*Brotherhood of Brass*) and returned to mainly Jewish material for 2005's ▸

Carnival Conspiracy, a *Top of the World* in January/February 2006.

Since then the band has been a little quiet, but suddenly they're back with *Chronika*. The best song here is a Jewish Caribbean mash-up called 'Unity (Carnival in Crown Heights)', bringing together the music of two of Brooklyn's communities, Hasidic Jews and West Indians, with the *soca*-style vocals of Michel 'Meshach' Nestor from St Lucia. Elsewhere the tunes are predominantly Hasidic from Eastern Europe with Yiddish vocals from Michael Alpert, Sarah Gordon and others. A new musical texture comes with the guitar and banjo of Brandon Seabrook and the late Yosi Piamenta, known as the 'Hasidic Hendrix'. The most interesting tracks come early on and the album rather loses inspiration with several remixes at the end.

SIMON BROUGHTON

TRACK TO TRY *Unity (Carnival in Crown Heights)*

Gao Hong & Ignacio Lusardi Monteverde
Alondra

ARC Music

★★★★½

Following her award-winning 2023 album with *kora*-player Kadialy Kouyate, US-based Chinese *pipa* virtuoso Gao Hong returns with a new duo collaboration, this time with flamenco guitarist Ignacio Lusardi Monteverde. Conceived when she was presented with the unexpected opportunity to record at Abbey Road Studios, Gao Hong opted to explore new territory with a London-based musician, rather than settle for the relative comfort of a solo recording. In a week she and Monteverde compiled a repertoire that draws from their respective backgrounds, as well as semi-improvised original material. The chemistry between the two players is clear from opening track 'Skylark Call', which blossoms from a gentle Mixolydian improvisation into a gorgeously composed unison melody, underscored by a flamenco-style tango rhythm. While Gao Hong and Monteverde come from disparate traditions, there's a shared sense of yearning that runs through much of *Alondra*. 'Longing for My Lover' is a familiar folk melody from Yunnan province, which evokes a woman searching for her lost love; while 'Prayer' is Monteverde's sombre tribute to those he lost during COVID-19. 'On the Clock' is a particular highlight: a thrilling *bulería* on which Gao Hong stretches her improvisatory capabilities, taking her instrument into unfamiliar modal realms. Filled with exquisite musicality and effortless spontaneity, *Alondra* is an impeccably chosen set of pieces by two masters of their craft.

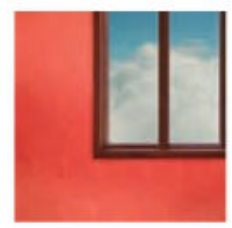
CHARLIE CAWOOD

TRACK TO TRY *Skylark Call*

Khruangbin
A LA SALA

Dead Oceans

★★★½☆



The Texas-based trio of bassist Laura Lee Ochoa, drummer Donald 'DJ' Johnson Jr and guitarist Marko Speer may be best known to *Songlines* readers for their 2022 collaboration with Vieux Farka Touré on which they covered eight tracks by Ali Farka Touré. *A LA SALA* returns to the style of their non-collaborative albums, with reverb-heavy guitar dancing around dubby bass patterns as global polyglot tendencies mingle with classic soul,

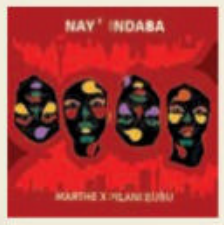
Marthe

TOP OF THE WORLD TRACK 8

Marthe x Pilani Bubu
Nay' Indaba

L'Oreille en Friche

★★★★½



In the Xhosa language, *indaba* refers to an authorised meeting, such as a conference of chiefs, called to discuss a pressing topic or topics. *Nay' Indaba*, Pilani Bubu's latest full-length album, is a compelling collection of songs addressing social, political and humanitarian issues, each of which showcases the singer-songwriter-folkorist's exceptionally agile voice, which melds characteristic South African cues – growls, trills, clicks, extended vibrato – with elements of new soul, hip-hop and contemporary jazz. French jazz-rockers Marthe provide a lithe, swinging, brassy platform for songs such as 'Asizolala', a modern rendering of a Xhosa folk song intended to instil hope. In 'Sithi Chu', Alexis Moutzouris' fluid sax and clarinet, Florent Briqué's fulsome trumpet, Lucas Territo's jagged electric guitar and Damien Bernard's drumming, seasoned with a dash of New Orleans second-line shuffle, serve as backdrop for a song about the trials and tribulations of street children in Bubu's hometown of Johannesburg. In 'Umfazi', Bubu and a female chorus exalt feminine strength and solidarity by insistently intoning a single word, '*woman*,' girded by hip-hop breaks. Called by an artist of commanding authority, *Nay' Indaba* is a musical conference of pressing importance.

DOUG DELOACH

TRACK TO TRY *Asizolala*

Pilani Bubu

Carlos Frazao, Jessica Calvo

rock and psych tropes. 'Pon Pón' has a vaguely West African dancefloor flavour, like Mali's Rail Band dosed with acid. 'Farolim de Felgueiras' and 'Caja de la Sala' are ambient, beatless instrumentals that seem to come from nowhere and everywhere. 'Hold Me Up (Thank You)' is funkier, 'Juegos y Nubes' has a mellow groove with a south-of-the-border mood *à la* Calexico and 'Three from Two' and 'May Ninth' twist traditional US roots into new shapes. Speer's guitar dominates with a tone somewhere between Hank Marvin and Marc Ribot with a touch of Baobab's Barthélémy Attisso – and if it's not really a world music record in any recognised sense of the term, it is nevertheless full of unusual and unexpected sonic rewards.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

TRACK TO TRY *Pon Pón*

KILEDJIAN
The Otium Mixtape

Underdog Records

★★★☆☆

David Kiledjian is a producer/musician based in Lyon. This debut solo album puts us in touch with Lyon's futurist electronic scene. Some readers will know of the city's annual Nuits Sonores festival that takes place and perhaps also of the reputation of its clubs, which are said to be challenging the chic cool of Paris. KILEDJIAN is the busy creative producer of Dowdelin, the 'Creole Afro-futurists' (*soi-disant*) whose two albums have been big on many a club dancefloor; he's also produced diverse artists including Armenian jazz pianist Tigran Hamasyan and Mali's BKO.

But for *The Otium Mixtape*, he's taken some time out, retreated to a house by the sea and filled his idyll with riffs on keyboards, sax, strings and homemade percussion. Then he mutated the demos into a laid-back soundworld where a jazz funk vibe mixes intimately with electronica and his French and Armenian musical roots, often topped off with guest vocalists from Lyon and further afield: Burkina Faso, Guadaloupe and the NYC jazz scene. One of KILEDJIAN's own favourite tracks is 'Shaadü' with a 9/8 rhythm played on driftwood sticks. Mine too! Other delights include the single 'Niloti (la Nuit) (feat Cindy Pooch)', '2600 (feat Sako Wana)', 'Dio (feat Celia Wa)' and a smoky jazz ballad 'Jalouse', sung heart-rendingly by Macha Gharibian. The *Otium* in the title relates to the ancient Roman practice of '*leisure purely for one's own pleasure with no benefit to the state or public,*' but KILEDJIAN has showered us with some (beneficially) rich and strange music.

MAX REINHARDT

TRACK TO TRY *Shaadü (feat Sako Wana)*

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Camilo Meriggio

EUROPEAN REGGAE
by Robin Denselow

Train To Roots

Reggae may have been given a new boost by *One Love*, the Bob Marley biopic, but it's a style that has never fallen from fashion – and four new albums provide a reminder that there's a healthy European reggae scene. **Train To Roots**, the best-known and most traditional of the bunch, have become a major band in Italy after starting out in Sardinia in 2004. ***Ancora Qui*** (Metatron Publishing / INRI, ★★★★) is their seventh album, a classy, easy-going set with lyrics in Italian and Sardo matched by tuneful melodies and sturdy vocals from Simone 'Bujumannu' Pireddu. No surprises, maybe, but it's packed with gently upbeat, rolling songs like 'Paxi (LKJ)' or 'Briciole'. From France there's DJ electronica from **Baltimores & Massilia Hi-Fi**, an outfit worth checking out for their lyrics, sung in English patois. The title-track on ***Global Crisis*** (Sonne Art ★★★) is a stomping warning about global disaster, while the delightful Organic Food announces '*Mi eat local products / Dem all come from France, especially from the South.*' Also from France, **Manudigital** is a bassist and synth player who uses an array of guest singers on ***Step Up*** (X-Ray Production ★★★). Jamaican DJ Joseph Cotton and British MC Bellyman feature on the title-track, the soulful Liam Bailey sings on 'Enough' while Ghetto Priest from Asian Dub Foundation brings cool, assured vocals to 'Rasta Corner'. From the Canary Islands, **Dactah Chando** mixes laid-back reggae with pop and soul on his 10th album ***Camino*** (Achinech Productions ★★★). It's an '*invitation to introspection and reflection*' that ranges from the cheerful 'Todos Juntos' to the thoughtful, drifting 'Libérate'.

The Sorcerers
I Too am a Stranger

ATA Records

★★★★☆

The Sorcerers are not exactly prolific – this is their third album in nine years – but they are a great band from Leeds, influenced by the classic Ethio-jazz styles of the 60s and 70s. And they have succeeded so well that one of their heroes, the great Mulatu Astatke, championed them on his Addis radio show. The *Éthiopiques* albums encouraged a spate of bands to make use of Ethiopia's distinctive scales and styles, but The Sorcerers have created a style of their own. Unlike Dub Colossus, one of my favourite Ethiopian-inspired bands, they don't mix reggae or dub with African styles (though there is a reggae edge to the cool, funky 'Oromo Moon'), but create soundscapes that would make fine atmospheric film music. Which is perhaps not surprising, as they cite European horror films as an influence. The tracks are instrumental, and based around insistent, slinky or exuberant percussion riffs over which Richard Ormrod (flute, vibes, keys) and Olivia Cuthill on trumpet add Ethio-melodies. From the opening exuberant 'He Who Kills with One Leap' to the flute work-out on 'Bebaynetu' or the final, alto-dominated 'She Who Perceives the Sounds of the World', this is a classy set.

ROBIN DENSELOW

TRACK TO TRY *He Who Kills with One Leap*

MY WORLD

Lonnie Holley

Doug DeLoach speaks to the sculptor, painter and musician who prioritises improvisation, with lyrics summoned on the spot and no two shows the same

"I try to talk to the whole level of humanity. I try to sing for the whole level of humanity." Those are the words of internationally renowned visionary artist, musician and educator Lonnie Holley.

Born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1950, the seventh of 27 children, Holley spent a significant portion of his life trying to '*sneak off the slave ship*,' to borrow a line from a song on his 2019 album, *MITH*. As a child, he was raised in foster homes where he was tormented by alcoholic caretakers. As a teenager, he was sent to a notorious state juvenile work farm (whose horrific legacy was told in the 2023 podcast *Unreformed: the Story of the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children*) where he was brutalised and tortured before being rescued at age 14 by his grandmother. "I didn't have no more than a seventh-grade education," Holley says. "I didn't know how to read and write that well."

Eventually, Holley steered away from the dark fate which befell many of his peers during the Jim Crow era, by virtue of an extraordinary imagination, intelligence and unflagging spirit. A self-taught sculptor, he garnered attention by carving small burial headstones from the sandstone-like detritus cast off by iron and steel foundries. Later, he created assemblages from scrap wood and metal, discarded household and office items, found objects and sundry materials. Over time, his hilltop yard next to the Birmingham airport was transformed into an art compound, which drew tour buses, collectors and scavengers.

In the 80s and 90s, Holley was deemed a leading member of the 'outsider art' movement, which celebrated work by 'non-traditional' and 'folk' artists. Today, his sculptures, paintings, drawings, collages, photography and installations can be seen in major museums and galleries around the world. In spring 2023, his work was included in the London Royal Academy of Arts' exhibition *Souls Grown Deep Like the Rivers: Black Artists from the American South*.

As a young man, Holley had always entertained himself by singing and noodling around on a cast-off Casio keyboard, performances which he recorded on cassette. His music career came years after his recognition as a visual artist. Holley's concerts are entirely improvised. The lyrics are rendered in the moment, based on daily experience and observation. The music is created onstage by Holley and a combination of accompanists who are either in the vicinity or recruited for the purpose. His singing draws on a collage of R&B, rap, scat and blues. From one bar, verse or song to the next, playful whistling and child-like jabberwocky can give way to Zulu growls and rock anthem revelry.

"The earliest music I remember hearing came from the Rock-Ola jukebox at the McElroy's [foster home] where people would come over for a shot of Joe Louis whiskey, which made them dance all night," Holley tells me. When asked his favourite songs, Holley replies, "I don't know if I have a favourite song list, but I love Stevie Wonder, Bob Dylan, Erykah Badu, Ray Charles, James Brown, Jackie Wilson, Aretha Franklin." Upon further pressing he says, "Jackie Wilson's 'Lonely Teardrops' taught me how to listen to the slower songs and get something different out of them. That's when I started listening to the words and not just the beat."

At one point, Holley lived in a house adjacent to a drive-in movie theatre where he earned pocket money picking up trash while also pocketing loose change found in popcorn boxes and on the ground where cars parked. He rigged an unofficially appropriated metal car speaker to carry sound from the theatre. "I used to sit on top of the house and watch and listen to every movie," Holley says. "I didn't really think at the time that I was listening to music, but now that I've made music for films… I see how much those memories have served me."

Since 2012, Holley has released five critically-acclaimed albums. The latest, *Oh Me Oh My* (2023), produced by Garret 'Jacknife' Lee, features collaborations with Bon Iver, Michael Stipe, Moor Mother, Sharon Van Etten and Rokia Koné, while a periodic touring schedule has seen him perform across the US, Europe, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand, sharing stages with Animal Collective, Deerhunter, Bill Callahan, Saul Williams, Tinariwen and Daniel Lanois.

Because *Oh Me Oh My* was recorded during the pandemic, the process involved sending music files back and forth with a minimum of direct interaction. "Despite the limitations, it was a great experience," Holley explains. "Jacknife and I were in the studio, but the only person who came into the studio was Moor Mother. We had been talking about doing something together, but could never find the time… We've since played together in Germany and we are leaving this week to tour Australia together with her band."

> "My music may not be like other people's, but I'm fine with that"

On tour, Holley is exposed to music from myriad cultures and sometimes recruits local musicians as accompanists. In New Zealand, he was joined onstage by Māori musicians. In Brazil, his friend and engineer Rafael Pereira took him to local performances. In Prague, he encountered street musicians playing trad Czech songs who let him sing and dance along. Back in the US, cellist-composer Ben Sollee stopped by Holley's art studio while on tour with his bluegrass band, Kentucky Native. When a jam broke out, Holley chimed in. "I didn't grow up with that kind of music, but it sounded so beautiful."

During the 2019 FORM Festival in Arizona, Holley performed with Robert Glasper and Vieux Farka Touré. In Los Angeles, Tinariwen invited him onstage to sing. "That was a beautiful night," Holley says. "It's so interesting when people from very different parts of the world can come together and play in the common language of music."

Before his first album as a professional, Holley explains that he "was just channelling what was in my head, trying to keep myself comforted by singing the truth to my mama and my grandmama and my kids since they were about the only people hearing me. Sometimes the neighbours might have heard me, too, but they never called the police."

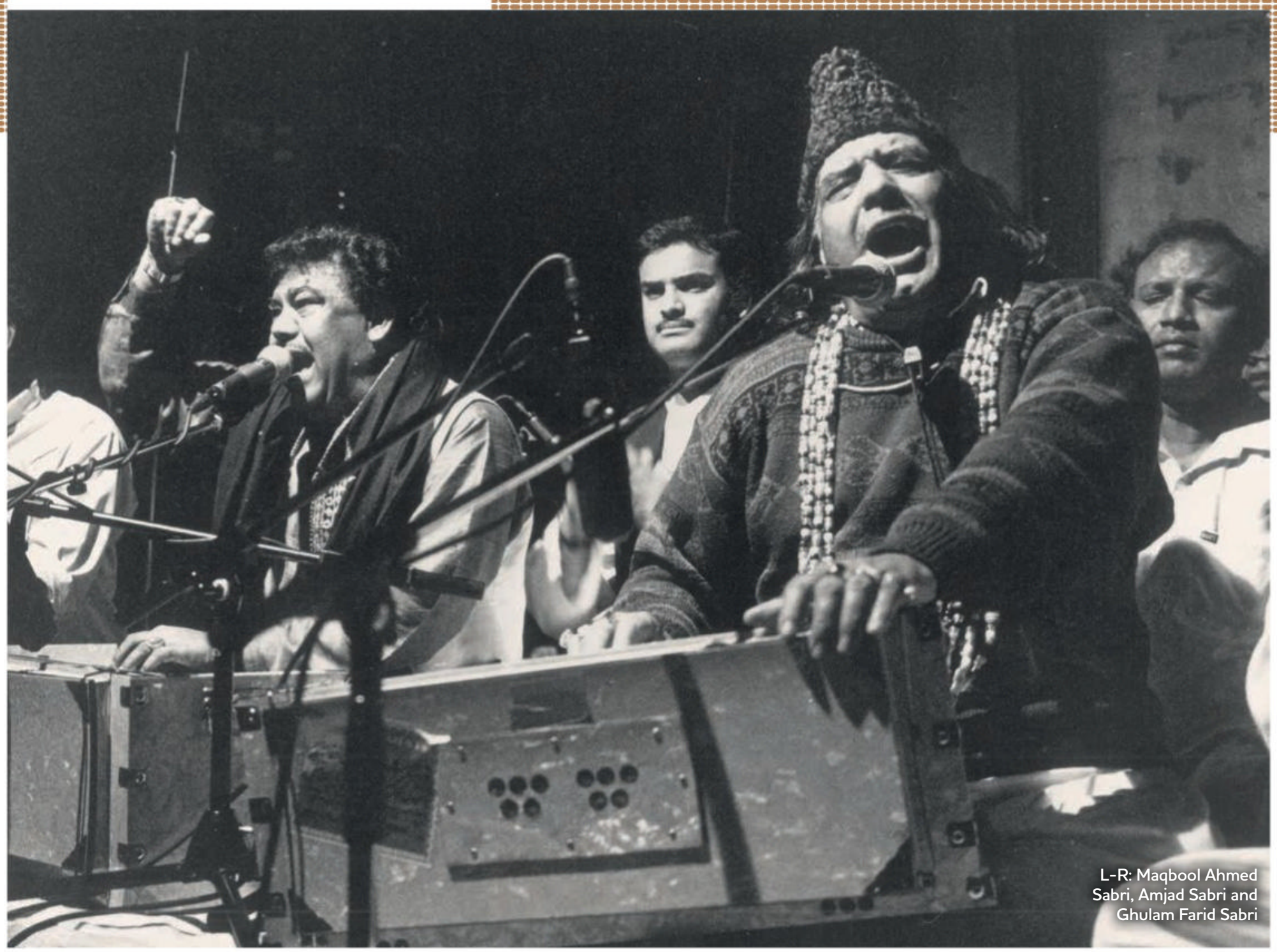
In the process of making albums and performing hundreds of concerts, Holley has developed a unique, distinctive sound and methodology. "My sound came naturally to me," he says. "But, playing and singing over the years has made me a better singer… I'm a long way from perfect, but I'm on the other side of the pulpit. I keep seeing what's happening in the world and trying to make music about it. My music may not be like other people's, but I'm totally fine with that. Just like my art, I wasn't doing it for other people, but it ended up in museums. I'm okay with that. I love sharing my art and music with people." ◆

***+ Lonnie Holley**'s 'I am a Part of the Wonder (feat Moor Mother)' is on this issue's compilation, track 14*

Matt Arnett

LONNIE HOLLEY'S
MY WORLD PLAYLIST

Jackie Wilson 'Lonely Teardrops'
Erykah Badu 'Next Lifetime'
Ben Sollee 'Eskimo Annie (feat Lonnie Holley & Jordon Ellis)'
Bill Callahan 'One Fine Morning'
Lonnie Holley 'I am a Part of the Wonder (feat Moor Mother)'
Bob Dylan 'Gotta Serve Somebody'
Etta Baker 'Railroad Bill'



L-R: Maqbool Ahmed Sabri, Amjad Sabri and Ghulam Farid Sabri

The Sabri Brothers

Jameela Siddiqi celebrates the legacy of the first *qawwali* group to find fame and send devotees into spiritual ecstasy around the world

The Sabri Brothers were South Asia's best-loved *qawwals*, that is, performers of *qawwali*, the music of Sufis (or Islamic mystics). Qawwals are probably the only musicians in the world with an actual job description: to raise spiritual awareness in their listeners so that, in performing qawwali, they are fulfilling a religious duty to convey the messages of love, peace and unity. Attending a qawwali is, by itself, the chief communal devotional ritual of Sufis. Although dozens of qawwali groups had been performing in the sub-continent for centuries, it was Pakistan's Ghulam Farid Sabri (d1994) and his younger brother Maqbool Ahmed Sabri (d2011), who first introduced this music to the Western world when they performed at New York's Carnegie Hall in 1975.

Reviews of that historic performance never fail to mention that the audience appeared to be in a state of unabashed ecstasy with many of the Indian and Pakistani diaspora going up to the stage with offerings of money and at least one man going as far as drawing blood from his head by banging it against the stage. Such scenes would be completely normal when qawwali is performed in its original setting, that is, at the tomb of a Sufi master, but the fact that it also happened in a concert hall setting, says a great deal about the mystical powers of qawwali and the prowess of the Sabri Brothers, who were able to communicate that spiritual ecstasy outside of its normal context.

In the decades that followed, another musician of the same genre, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (d1997), took the world by storm as he shot to fame in places as far apart as Berlin and Tokyo. But it was the Sabris who had paved the way for Khan and others to perform in packed concert halls the world over. In the inevitable comparisons, many aficionados maintain that the Sabris were the real thing, as their fan base was largely in the home market (including the South Asian diaspora) while Khan, who collaborated with musicians of many other traditions, was the one who appealed more to 'foreigners.'

Ghulam Farid gave his first public performance in 1946, in Kalyana, eastern Punjab, which is now in India, but the family migrated to newly formed Pakistan after partition. The group was initially formed by the younger brother Maqbool Sabri in 1956 while he was still only 11 and known as *Bachche* qawwal, literally 'child-qawwal', with older brother Ghulam Farid eventually joining him.

Courtesy of Piranha Records

A strictly all-male hereditary business, qawwals are required to initially train in Indian classical music. This process begins in childhood followed by subsequent training in percussion and vocal techniques specific to qawwali, including memorising thousands of verses of mystical poetry in Farsi (Persian), old literary Hindi and Arabic as well as more modern contemporary poems in Urdu. Qawwali was invented in the 13th century in Delhi by the polyglot mystic poet-musician-musicologist Amir Khusrau (d1325) and many qawwals are said to be direct descendants of musicians originally trained by Khusrau himself. The Sabris also claim direct descent from the legendary Tansen, a 16th-century court musician at the time of the Mughal emperor Akbar.

A chorus of voices, claps and pounding, syncopated rhythms distinguish qawwali from other forms of Indian classical music. There is always a leader or principal vocalist to establish the melody line with a secondary vocalist echoing the line in a higher register, eventually joined by a chorus and percussion. Ghulam Farid and Maqbool Ahmed were the principal and secondary vocalists respectively in the Sabris. They had entirely different tonal qualities, but their voices complemented one another perfectly. Added to that, Ghulam Farid had a unique touch of punctuating certain catchphrases with the single word '*Allah*,' delivered in an extra-low pitch which, by itself, sent fans into a frenzy, and even though Maqbool Ahmed was the secondary vocalist, it could be argued that he had one of the finest qawwali voices of all time. The group also stood out for their highly inventive percussion and the brothers' talent for spontaneously launching into anecdotes mid-song, without losing sight of melody or rhythm.

Initially only performing at Sufi tombs and small private gatherings, the early 1970s marked the rise of their fame with regular appearances on Pakistan's national television service and some of their early 1950s hits, including 'Tajdar-e-Haram', 'Mera Koi Nahin Tere Siwa' and their most-enduring qawwali song 'Bhar do Jholi Meri Ya Muhammad', making their way into Pakistani films of the time, with the latter song featuring in a crucial sequence of an Indian film as recently as 2015.

While the 1970s saw them at their zenith, towards the end of that decade, Pakistan had fallen into one of its most repressive military dictatorships headed by General Zia-ul-Haq which took the country from its secular constitution to one that enforced orthodox Islamic *sharia*, which stands opposed to Sufis in general and their music in particular. While lesser musicians were forced to seek alternative employment, the Sabris, fortunately, had already made a name for themselves abroad and continued to perform in packed concert halls and private gatherings around the world.

While preparing to set off for a major European tour in April 1994, Ghulam Farid died unexpectedly. Maqbool Ahmed continued to perform, alongside his youngest brother Mehmood Sabri until Maqbool, who had all but relocated to South Africa, also died in 2011.

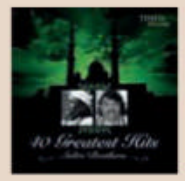
At least one man went as far as drawing blood from his head by banging it against the stage

Many consider the Sabri Brothers' halcyon days to have ended with the death of both brothers although younger family members went on to perform in various qawwali groups of their own. Tragedy hit the family again when Amjad Sabri, son of Ghulam Farid and the only descendent who went on to have a glittering independent career, was assassinated in Pakistan in 2016. Two distinct factions claimed responsibility, citing 'blasphemy' as the reason for his murder.

The Sabri Brothers have left a vast treasury of qawwali, but some of their best performances can only be found on private recordings of the 70s and 80s – usually on very poor quality video tape with equally dire audio to match. The YouTube age has made most of this material freely accessible, including a performance of their huge hit 'Tajdar-e-Haram' from 1988 in Dubai with an extra-long percussive intro. ◆

+ ***JAMI****, a recording of Ghulam Farid and Amjad Sabri, is being reissued on vinyl by Piranha with edited and remastered versions of the original tracks. 'Tanam Farsuda Jan' features on this issue's compilation, track 15*

BEST ALBUMS



Sabri Brothers
40 Greatest Hits
(Times Music, 2012)
This compilation album of the siblings' most-loved songs lasts eight hours and 11 minutes, and includes the world's first *qawwali* song, 'Man Kunto Maula', and their interpretation of the famous Farsi poem 'Khabaram raseed im shab', both by Amir Khusrau.

The Sabri Brothers & Ensemble
Qawwali: Sufi Music from Pakistan
(Nonesuch, 1978)
An all-time best-seller with four outstanding songs including an ecstatic performance of 'Dai Halima', referring to the wet nurse who cared for the prophet Muhammad and also an unusually restrained rendition of 'Duma Dum Mast Qalandar', a favourite which was delivered with a much faster tempo in later years.

Sabri Brothers
JAMI
(Piranha, 1996)
Ghulam Farid Sabri had a lifelong wish to devote an entire album to the poetry of 15th-century Persian Sufi poet Jami. Although recorded in a Berlin studio in 1991, the album could not be released during his lifetime. Ghulam Farid has never sounded better than on this recording, which sadly became his swan song.

IF YOU LIKE THE SABRI BROTHERS THEN TRY...

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan
Traditional Sufi Qawwali Live in London, Vol I
(Navras, 1993)
Performed before a small gathering, this recording conveys the most authentic atmosphere befitting a *qawwali* recital.

WIN
We have three copies of *JAMI* to give away. To win one, tell us: in which year did Ghulam Farid give his first public performance?
See p21 for competition rules

The Sabri Brothers in action

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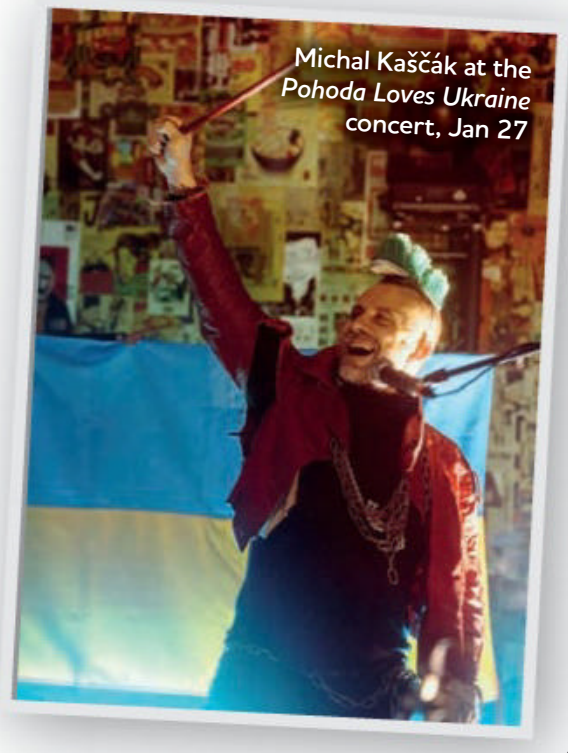
DISPATCH FROM

Kyiv, Ukraine

Mateusz Dobrowolski heads to the war-torn Ukrainian capital to discover the current state of cultural life on the banks of the Dnieper

"It's so good you woke up. Hurry, there will be a serious strike on the city, we have less than 30 minutes to be at the metro." It's 6am on Tuesday, January 23, 2024. We spend the next three hours at the Zhytomyrska tube station in the western part of Right-bank Kyiv, drinking herbal tea, listening to metro trains passing by and looking at the Telegram chatroom app which is providing official updates on the situation. And we exchange online messages with neighbours and friends from the city who decided to stay in their homes. "Oh, there's a dud missile in our neighbourhood," my friend finds out. "Look, the cars are burning from the shot-down remnants of a combat missile, there's a video," they add. On that morning, throughout the country, Russian missiles kill a total of 18 people and injure more than 130. Most of them are in Kharkiv and Kherson near the frontline. That's my first morning in the capital of Ukraine, a visit I will remember for a very long time.



Michal Kaščák at the *Pohoda Loves Ukraine* concert, Jan 27

The struggles of war are reflected in the current way of life and art. I go to see Oleh Malov's photo series *Blackout*. And see a fragmentary reflection of controlled madness at the Taras Shevchenko Museum, whose exhibitions remain open to visitors. It features self-portraits in black and white, with minimal lighting and afterglows resulting from long exposure time. Even more surreal are photos by Andrii Kotliarchuk. Also black and white, they feature remnants of war and people dressed as mystical heroes from Ukrainian fairy tales. The Shevchenko Museum presents the history of Taras, the father of Ukrainian identity: a poet, illustrator, ethnographer, activist and political prisoner of the 19th century. A very different situation and another must-see, The Ivan Honchar Museum National Centre of Folk Culture deserves its reputation as the ethnographic heart of Kyiv. The museum's collection is currently stored in shelters, with only a temporary exhibition of contemporary Ukrainian naïve art available to visitors.

The entire cultural sector is donation-driven right now; either all or part of the profits from events, sales and other income goes to the Armed Forces of Ukraine or humanitarian aid. People support particular battalions, companies or soldiers, their friends or relatives. That's also the case of a special concert at the Ivan Honchar Museum on January 27, raising money for the 251st separate Kyivska Sich battalion. It's both a post-Christmas celebration carolling and the anniversary of the museum's patron's birth in 1911. Ivan Honchar was a hugely important folk art collector. There are three bands on the bill: a traditional polyphonic choir from the Komyshi village in the Sumy region (who end up cancelling their performance), children's choir Oreli and ShchukaRyba, a vocal and instrumental ensemble formed out of a young generation of folk music performers in Kyiv. They're the flagship of the style, with a massive social media audience. The gig is well attended.

The evening before the concert I meet ShchukaRyba at Traditional Music Space, the tiny headquarters of Rys' Foundation, a leading NGO specialising in the informal education of folk music (see my *Dispatch* from December 2023, #193). I'm a silent observer of the evening party which completes a project taking place in one of Kyiv's high schools where there have been several workshops with the pupils, covering traditional carols and public performances with a newly learned repertoire. Rys" Andrii Levchenko and Kateryna Kapra present an online quiz about Ukrainian folklore and heritage. It's fun and engaging and proves to be a useful educational tool. There's also tea to drink, cherry cake, a cosy atmosphere and long conversations between the teenagers and their older colleagues.

ShchukaRyba perform their songs in a traditional way but remain open to musical 'clashes,' as evidenced by their brand-new digital EP, *Shcho i Svyatoye*, in which they've collaborated with electronic musician Bunht and guitarist Yevhen Puhachov to present Ukrainian carols. They premiered the project in early January 2024 at Atlas, the venue in Kyiv run by the same people who do Atlas Festival (Ukraine's largest pre-war open-air festival). Also, on January 27 there's a benefit concert, *Pohoda Loves Ukraine*, inside the Atlas venue. It's a joint venture of Music Saves UA, a humanitarian aid initiative founded by the Ukrainian Association of Music Events (UAME), and the Pohoda Festival from Trenčín, Slovakia. There are three bands from Ukraine – Hyphen Dash, Lucas Bird and Stantsiya Myr – and five bands from Slovakia – Berlin Manson, Michael Kocáb + Karpatské chrbáty, FVLCRVM, FARA and VBPS with their frontman Michal Kaščák, the founder of Pohoda Festival. Somewhere in the middle of the performances, the air raid alert is sounded. Vlad Yaremchuk, programming director of Atlas Festival, whom I have met at music conferences around Europe delivering great talks on the current situation of Ukrainian culture, comes on stage to ask the audience to go to the nearest shelter. It doesn't take an hour before the concert is restarted. All the bands finish their performances before the curfew, just as planned. And that's the thought that will echo with me on my train back to Warsaw: that no matter the obstacles, Ukrainians are determined to deliver. It's been ten years since they started defending themselves from Russia's takeover, with the invasion of Crimea, and the message remains the same: they need "ammunition, not a ride," to borrow Zelensky's words. ◆

Yuri Gryaznov

APRIL–MAY 2024

Gig Guide

Domenico Lancellotti (right) & Ricardo Dias Gomes

Songlines picks…

Altin Gün (Apr 11, London) Last UK chance to see the Anatolian group with original vocalist Merve Daşdemir before she departs for pastures new.

Orchestra Baobab (May 2-10, On Tour) The Senegalese group keep regrouping and will be travelling throughout the UK to celebrate 50 years since forming.

Eliza Carthy (Apr 12 – May 19, On Tour) Get up close and personal with one of English folk's greats as our esteemed columnist heads out on a solo tour.

Domenico Lancellotti & Ricardo Dias Gomes (Apr 21, London) Nobody makes samba quite like these two hugely inventive musicians from Rio.

LONDON

7 APR Celebrating the Life of Rathi Karthigesu The Bhavan FREE bhavan.net; **9 APR Idris Ackamoor & The Pyramids** Jazz Cafe; **11 APR Roots and Endz** Rich Mix richmix.org.uk; **Nitin Sawhney** Alexandra Palace Theatre; **Altin Gün** Troxy; **12 APR Lila Downs** Barbican; **Omar Puente Charanga Sextet** Ronnie Scott's; **Ruba Shamshoum** Grand Junction; **12-13 APR Aakash Odedra Company + Aditi Mangaldas Company** Sadler's Wells; **13 APR Ana Tijoux** Village Underground; **Jamarabia** Grand Junction grandjunction.org.uk; **Afriquoi** Jazz Cafe; **El Swing Descarga Band** The Portico; **14 APR Fran & Flora** Omeara; **Los Tigres del Norte** Eventim Apollo; **Nritya Utsav** The Bhavan; **15 APR East Corner Trio + Phoebe Harty & Cori Smith** Green Note; **16 APR La Yegros** The Jazz Cafe; **TangOpera** St James's Church; **17 APR Creative Connections feat Kuljit Bahmra, Attab Haddad & others** St John's Waterloo; **The Kimberleys** World Heart Beat Embassy Gardens; **17-20 APR Paco Peña Flamenco Dance Company** Sadler's Wells; **18 APR Ana Carla Maza** Jazz Cafe; **Sarabanda** Queen of the South; **The Ayoub Sisters** Grand Junction; **19 APR Ëda Diaz** Servant Jazz Quarters; **Fruko & The Bonita House Band** The Jazz Cafe; **Olcay Bayir** Grand Junction; **Gavin Fairhall Lever** World Heart Beat Embassy Gardens; **19-21 APR Folk Weekend: State of The Nations** (Shovel Dance Collective, Cohen Braithwaite-Kilcoyne, Kathryn Tickell & The Darkening, Alasdair Roberts, Catrin Finch & Aoife Ní Bhriain) Kings Place; **20 APR Bengali New Year Celebrations** The Bhavan; **Abdoulaye Samb + Muntu Valdo** Peckham Levels; **Baque Luar** Fox & Firkin; **Desta French, Sophie Castillo, JSCA + Milena Sanchez** The Jazz Cafe; **Omar Puente & Ilario Ferrari** Brasserie Zédel; **21 APR Bhaav Vistaar** The Bhavan; **Domenico Lancellotti & Ricardo Dias Gomes** Cafe Oto; **Free Gaza: Galilee Quartet, Sarathy Korwar, Ghalia Benali + others** EartH earthackney.co.uk; **22 APR Nação Zumbi** Jazz Cafe; **24 APR Jembaa Groove** Jazz Cafe; **26 APR Errol Linton** The Portico; **Lucas Santtana** The Forge; **28 APR Emilija Karaliute + Roary Skaista + Tamise** The Harrison; **29 APR Getz/Gilberto 60th Anniversary: Raquel Martins & Friends** Jazz Cafe; **29-30 APR Antonio Forcione Quartet** Ronnie Scott's; **30 APR Bem Gil & Moreno Veloso** Jazz Cafe; **2 MAY Supriya Nagarajan, Duncan Chapman & Lucy Nolan** Woolwich Works; **3 MAY Prasanna** The Bhavan; **4 MAY Cairokee** Barbican; **Khanvict & Raaginder** Lafayette; **5 MAY Duo Tanghe Coudroy** The Harrison; **6 MAY Lena Jonsson & Brittany Haas** Green Note; **6-12 MAY Gypsy Jazz Festival of London** London; **7 MAY Dora Morelenbaum** Bush Hall; **9 MAY MiraLamar Duo** World Heart Beat Embassy Gardens; **Chris Stout & Catriona McKay + Chloe Matharu** Kings Place; **10 MAY Tcha Limberger's Viper Club** World Heart Beat Embassy Gardens; **Amaraterra** Brasserie Zédel; **Adam Beattie & Fiona Bevan** Kings Place; **11 MAY Raag Rang: Harmony in Hues** The Bhavan; **Tropic Peru** The Portico; **Megan Henderson Trio** Kings Place; **Sona Jobarteh** Barbican; **Verito Asprilla + Cerrero** Peckham Levels; **Ladaniva** Bush Hall.

SOUTH

9 APR Nitin Sawhney Brighton Dome; **19 APR Jali Bakary Konteh** The Rosehill, Brighton; **Antonio Forcione & Giorgio Serci** The Verdict, Brighton; **27 APR Antonio Forcione & Giorgio Serci** St Andrew's Church, Ampthill; **28 APR Johnny Campbell** Bluebell Roots, Polegate; **3 MAY Ana Carla Maza** Saffron Hall, Saffron Walden; **4 MAY Anna Mudeka** Colchester Arts Centre; **11 MAY Adam Beattie & Fiona Bevan** Ashburton Arts Centre, Newton Abbot.

WALES & WEST

10 APR TUNA Choir St George's Bristol; **15 APR La Yegros** The Jam Jar, Bristol; **24 APR Lucas Santtana** The Jam Jar, Bristol; **25 APR Jembaa Groove** The Jam Jar, Bristol; **2 MAY Raka Balkan Band** The Jam Jar, Bristol; **Juan Martín** Hellens Manor, Ledbury; **3-5 MAY Bristol Folk Festival Bristol**; **3-6 MAY The Magic Teapot Gathering** Somerset; **5 MAY Fatoumata Diawara** Cheltenham Town Hall; **6 MAY Catrin Finch & Aoife Ní Bhriain** Mwldan, Cardigan; **Orchestral Qawwali Project** Bristol Beacon; **10 MAY Catrin Finch & Aoife Ní Bhriain** Galeri, Caernarfon; **Talisk** Bristol Beacon; **10-12 MAY Tredegar House Folk Festival** Tredegar House Park, Newport; **11 MAY Bradford on Avon Green Man Festival** Bradford on Avon; **Talisk** Wem Town Hall; **Whitchurch Folk Festival** Whitchurch; **12 MAY Sona Jobarteh** St George's Bristol.

MIDLANDS

8 APR Nitin Sawhney Town Hall, Birmingham; **12 APR Afriquoi**

songlines.co.uk/gig-guide All information correct at time of going to press. Email listings for print and online consideration to listings@songlines.co.uk

Norwich Arts Centre; **18 APR** [1pm] **TwoManTing** Symphony Hall, Birmingham FREE; **Anna Mudeka** New Wolsley Theatre, Ipswich; **3 MAY Anna Mudeka** St George's Theatre, Great Yarmouth; **Jacob & Drinkwater** The Ropewalk, Barton on Humber; **3-5 MAY Bray Jazz Festival** Bray; **Raunds Music Festival** Wellingborough; **3-6 MAY Upton upon Severn Folk Festival** Upton upon Severn; **10-12 MAY Folk on the Pier** Cromer Pier; **11 MAY Midday Mantra** Symphony Hall, Birmingham bmusic.co.uk

NORTH

7 APR Mikey Kenney The John Peel Centre, Wigton; **17 APR** [1pm] **Jali Bakary Konteh** The Tung Auditorium, Liverpool FREE; **Ana Carla Maza** Howard Assembly Room, Leeds; **19 APR Mehek** Northern Stage, Newcastle upon Tyne; **24 APR** [1pm] **Debasmita Bhattacharya & Kousic Sen** The Tung Auditorium, Liverpool FREE; **25 APR Lucas Santtana** Band on the Wall, Manchester; **27 APR Shantala Subramanyam** The Glasshouse, Gateshead; **28 APR Dele Sosimi Afrobeat Experience** Future Yard, Birkenhead; **2 MAY Cahalen Morrison** Cafe#9, Sheffield; **Calum Gilligan** St Michael's in the Hamlet, Liverpool; **Ana Carla Maza** Firth Hall, Sheffield; **3-5 MAY Filey Folk Festival** Filey; **Todmorden Folk Festival** Todmorden, Calder Valley; **3-6 MAY Scandimoot** Clapham, Yorkshire Dales; **4 MAY Jacob & Drinkwater** The Horse & Farrier, Otley; **5 MAY Dan Walsh** The Institute, Laxey; **9 MAY Orchestra Mambo International** Howard Assembly Room, Leeds; **Talisk** The Met, Bury; **10 MAY Niladri Kumar & Yashwant Vaishnav** The Tung Auditorium, Liverpool; **Jon Boden** Barnoldswick Music & Arts Centre; **10-12 MAY Holmfirth Festival of Folk** Holmfirth; **11 MAY** [1.30pm] **Ninad Daithankar** Band on the Wall, Manchester; **Catrin Finch & Aoife Ní Bhriain** Pocklington Arts Centre; **12 MAY Sacred Music: Celebrate the Spirit** Howard Assembly Room, Leeds operanorth.co.uk; **The Hackles** The Live Room, Saltaire.

SCOTLAND

7 APR Nitin Sawhney Old Fruitmarket, Glasgow; **20 APR Glenfarg Folk Feast Day** Glenfarg Village Hall, Perth; **Gnoss** The Tunnels, Aberdeen; **26-28 APR Northern Streams Festival** The Pleasance, Edinburgh; **3-5 MAY Girvan Traditional Folk Festival** Girvan; **3-13 MAY Edinburgh Tradfest** Edinburgh; **5 MAY Prasanna** Edinburgh Academy; **9-11 MAY Skye Live** Portree, Isle of Skye; **10-12 MAY Moniaive Folk Festival** Moniaive.

IRELAND (Republic & Northern)

11 APR McGoldrick, McCusker & Doyle The Duncairn, Belfast; **Neil Martin + Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh + Paddy Glackin + Ryan Molloy** Whyte Recital Hall, Dublin; **12 APR Ana Tijoux** The Grand Social, Dublin; **McGoldrick, McCusker & Doyle** Down Arts Centre, Downpatrick; **13 APR McGoldrick, McCusker & Doyle** St Augustine's, Derry; **14 APR McGoldrick, McCusker & Doyle** Dún Uladh, Omagh; **26 APR Andy Irvine & Dónal Lunny** Live at St Luke's, Cork; **3-4 MAY Tradition Now** National Concert Hall, Dublin; **3-6 MAY Féile Chois Cuain** Louisburgh; **8 MAY Flook** Pavilion Theatre, Dún Laoghaire; **9 MAY Flook** Triskel Arts Centre, Cork; **9-12 MAY Baltimore Fiddle Fair** Baltimore; **10-12 MAY Fleadh Cheoil Chorcaí** Douglas; **11 MAY Flook** The Malt House, Stradbally.

TOURS

Anna Anise + boci
Feel-good folk for the spring

7 APR Square & Compass, Worth Matravers FREE; **9 APR** Secret Location, Hastings; **10 APR** [boci only] The Folklore Rooms, Brighton; **12 APR** The Barrel House, Totnes; **13 APR** The Barbican, Plymouth; **14 APR** The Bridge, Langport; **15 APR** The Bell Inn, Bath FREE. *annaanise.com*

Frankie Archer
Captivating electro-folk

11 APR The Glasshouse, Gateshead; **16 APR*** The Prince Albert, Brighton; **17 APR*** Kitchen Carden Cafe, Birmingham; **18 APR*** West Hampstead Arts Club, London; **19 APR*** St Mary's Creative Space, Chester; **4 MAY** Bristol Folk Festival; **7 MAY** Edinburgh Tradfest; **10 MAY** Lost in the Hills Festival, Ashbourne; **11 MAY** Whitchurch Folk Festival; **12 MAY** The Wight Bear, Southbourne. *supporting Jim Moray. *frankiearchermusic.com*

Jack Badcock
Dallahan frontman on solo tour

1 MAY Inverness Acoustic Music Club; **5 MAY** Playhouse, Penrith; **6 MAY** Stirling Folk Club; **8 MAY** Dunfermline Folk Club; **9 MAY** Crail Folk Club; **10 MAY** The Blue Lamp, Aberdeen. *jackbadcock.com*

The Breath
Pieces from Land of My Other

6 APR Brewery Arts, Kendal; **20 APR** Bijou Cinema, Southport; **21 APR** Wainsgate Chapel, Hebden Bridge; **26 APR** Aviva Studio, Manchester; **30 APR** Turner Sims, Southampton; **1 MAY** Acapela Studio, Cardiff; **2 MAY** Temperance, Leamington Spa; **3 MAY** Bristol Cathedral. *thebreathmusic.com*

The Budapest Cafe Orchestra
Klezmer-Balkan-Russian energy!

19 APR Century Theatre, Coalville; **26 APR** Ashley Green Memorial Hall; **27 APR** The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury; **8 MAY** The Ropewalk, Barton upon Humber; **11 MAY** Georgian Theatre Royal, Richmond. *budapestcafeorchestra.co.uk*

Janice Burns & Jon Doran
Anglo-Scottish trad folk duo

3-4 MAY Upton Folk Festival, Upton upon Severn; **5 MAY** Black Fen Folk Club, Cambridge; **6 MAY** Cellar Upstairs Folk Club, London; **7 MAY** The Hoy at Anchor, Leigh on Sea; **9 MAY** Rosslyn Court, Margate; **10 MAY** Vyne Theatre, Berkhamsted; **11 MAY** Kirkgate Arts, Cockermouth. *janandjon.com*

Sam Carter
Touring his brilliant new album

11 APR Kitchen Garden Cafe, Birmingham; **14 APR** Green Note, London; **1 MAY** The Musician, Leicester; **2 MAY** The Folklore Rooms, Brighton; **5 MAY** Raunds Music Festival; **9 MAY** Samuel Worth Chapel, Sheffield; **12 MAY** Bristol Folk House. *samcartermusic.co.uk*

Eliza Carthy
Folk from Robin Hood's Bay

12 APR Squire PAC, Nottingham; **13 APR** Ropetackle, Shoreham-by-Sea; **14 APR** Walton Folk, Walton on Thames; **19 APR** mac, Birmingham; **20 APR** North Wall, Oxford; **25 APR** Cecil Sharp House, London; **26 APR** Bristol Folk House; **27 APR** The Greystones, Sheffield; **10 MAY** Storey's Field Centre, Cambridge; **11 MAY** Jubilee Hall, Aldeburgh; **12-13 MAY** Temperance; Leamington Spa; **17 MAY** Otley Courthouse. *eliza-carthy.com*

Brìghde Chaimbeul
Purveyor of Scottish smallpipes

23 APR Trades Club, Hebden Bridge; **24 APR** Samuel Worth Chapel, Sheffield; **25 APR** Brewery Arts, Kendal; **26 APR** Tolbooth, Stirling; **27 APR** An Tobar, Isle of Mull; **28 APR** Summerhall, Edinburgh; **1 MAY** Connelly's of Leap, Cork; **2 MAY** Seanscoil Sailearna, Galway; **3 MAY** Dock Arts, Leitrim; **12 MAY** The World's Music at Oxford FREE. *brichaimbeul.com*

Dallahan
Enthralling shows from four-piece

12 APR Bristol Folk House; **13 APR** Ferndown Village Hall; **14 APR** Belper Meadows Cricket Club; **17 APR** Music Room, Liverpool; **18 APR** Ropetackle, Shoreham-by-Sea; **19 APR** Southside, Lincoln; **20 APR** Brewery Arts, Kendal; **21 APR** The Live Room, Saltaire; **11 MAY** Skye Live, Portree. *dallahanmusic.com*

Ahmed Dickinson Cárdenas & Eduardo Martín
Two acoustic guitars interweave

7 APR Ashburton Arts Centre, Newton Abbot; **10 APR** St Catherine's, Ventnor; **12 APR** Wexford Arts Centre; **13 APR** Ballina Arts Centre; **14 APR** Portico of Ards; **18 APR** Colchester Arts Centre; **19 APR** Temperance, Leamington Spa; **20 APR** Georgian Theatre Royal, Richmond; **25 APR** The Cut, Halesworth; **26 APR** Cranleigh School; **27 APR** Unit24 Gallery, London; **1 MAY** Rosehall Village Hall, Altas; **2 MAY** An Tobar & Mull Theatre; **3 MAY** Bunessan Village Hall, Isle of Mull; **4 MAY** Alnwick Playhouse; **5 MAY** Church of the Sacred Heart, Edinburgh; **9 MAY** Tayvallich Village Hall; **10 MAY** West Coast Arts, Gairloch; **11 MAY** Watergate Theatre; **14 MAY** Kenmare Butter Market; **15 MAY** St John's Theatre, Listowel.. *ahmeddickinson.com*

Jon Doran
And his Northern Assembly

6 APR The Ropewalk, Barton upon Humber; **7 APR** The Horse & Farrier, Otley; **11 APR** The Cumberland Arms, Newcastle upon Tyne; **12 APR** Bishop's Castle Town Hall; **13 APR** Pound Arts, Corsham; **14 APR** Ilmington Village Hall; **16 APR** [online gig] Live to Your Living Room. *jondoranmusic.co.uk*

Elephant Sessions
Full-on Highland power!

2 MAY The Fleece, Bristol; **3 MAY** Cambridge Junction; **4 MAY** The Pigs Nose Inn, Kingsbridge; **5 MAY** The Garage, London; **10 MAY** Lemon Tree, Aberdeen. *elephantsessions.com*

Fara
Scotland's fab fiddle-led foursome

10 APR Universal Hall, Findhorn; **12 APR** Perth Theatre; **13 APR** Eden Court, Inverness; **18 APR** King Street Halls, Orkney; **19 APR** The Arc Sessions, Fochabers; **20 APR** An Lanntair, Stornoway; **26 APR** Eastgate Theatre, Peebles; **27 APR** Brewery Arts,

Gig Guide

Kendal; **28 APR** The Crescent, York. *faramusic.co.uk*

Daoirí Farrell
Irish singer and bouzouki player
10 APR The Met, Bury; **11 APR** Otley Courthouse; **12 APR** Brewery Arts, Kendal; **14 APR** Temperance, Leamington Spa; **15 APR** Cambridge Junction; **16 APR** Regal, Tenbury Wells; **17 APR** Chapel Arts, Bath; **19 APR** St Edith Folk, Sevenoaks; **20 APR** Lewes Saturday Folk Club; **25 APR** Uxbridge Folk Club; **26-27 APR** Irish Cultural Centre, London; **28 APR** The Welfare, Ystradgynlais. *daoiri.com*

Granny's Attic
The inimitable English folk trio
25 APR The Forum, Darlington; **27 APR** Kirkgate Arts, Cockermouth; **2 MAY** The Glasshouse, Gateshead; **3 MAY** St Andrew's Church, Sheffield; [online gig] Live to Your Living Room; **4 MAY** Brewery Arts, Kendal; **5 MAY** Leigh Spinners Mill; **8 MAY** The Stables, Milton Keynes; **9 MAY** Kitchen Garden Cafe, Birmingham; **10 MAY** The Bigg Theatre, Biggleswade; **11 MAY** Ashcroft Arts, Fareham; **12 MAY** Folk at the Froize, Woodbridge; **13 MAY** Colchester Arts Centre; **14 MAY** Anteros Arts Foundation, Norwich; **15 MAY** Cecil Sharp House, London; **16 MAY** Norwegian Church Arts Centre, Cardiff. *grannysattic.org.uk*

Fay Hield
Exploring English traditions
7 APR Hare & Hounds, Birmingham; **8 APR** Grove Folk Club, Leeds; **17 APR** Anteros Foundation, Norwich; **18 APR** Rosslyn Court, Margate; **19 APR** Folk at the Barlow, Edgworth; **21 APR** Folk at the Froize, Woodbridge; **22 APR** Grand Union Folk Club, Loughborough; **23 APR** Cutty Wren Folk Club, Redcar; **24 APR** Town Hall, Middlesbrough. *fayhield.com*

Ímar
Five-piece set the place ablaze
10 APR The Greystones, Sheffield; **11 APR** Music Hall, Liverpool; **12 APR** Kings Place, London; **13 APR** Emsworth Baptist Church; **14 APR** The Fleece Inn, Bretforton; **15 APR** Nettlebed Folk Club; **16 APR** Norwich Arts Centre; **17 APR** Lakeside Arts, Nottingham; **18 APR** Brewery Arts, Kendal; **19 APR** The Barn, Banchory; **20 APR** The Tolbooth, Stirling. *imarband.com*

Peter Knight's Gigspanner
Quietly brilliant folk music
1 MAY Stables, Hastings; **2 MAY** Shaftesbury Arts Centre; **3 MAY** The Pound, Corsham; **4 MAY** Assembly Rooms, Presteigne; **5 MAY** St Peter's Church, Kinver; **7 MAY** St Bartholomew's Hall, Coventry; **8 MAY** The Guildhall, Leicester; **9 MAY** Ropery Hall, Barton-upon-Humber; **10 MAY** Helmsley Arts Centre; **11 MAY** Ripon Arts Hub; **12 MAY** The Hub at St Mary's, Lichfield; **13 MAY** St Andrew's Church, Wiveliscombe; **14 MAY** The Pavilion, Teignmouth; **15 MAY** Kingsand Community Hall. *gigspanner.com*

Lady Maisery
Folk trio touring Tender album
3 MAY The Cat Asylum, Newark; **4 MAY** Todmorden Folk Festival; **5 MAY** [two shows] The Greystones, Sheffield; **7 MAY** Borough Theatre, Abergavenny; **8 MAY** Ludlow Assembly Rooms; **9 MAY** The North Wall, Oxford; **10 MAY** The Subscription Rooms, Stroud; **11 MAY** Carnglaze Caverns, Liskeard; **12 MAY** Bridport Arts Centre; **15 MAY** Bristol Beacon; **16 MAY** The Round Chapel, London. *ladymaisery.com*

Lau
The acclaimed trio unplugged
20 APR Portree Community Centre; **25 APR** The Fire Station, Sunderland; **26 APR** Kings Place, London; **27 APR** Brewery Arts, Kendal; **3 MAY** First Presbyterian Church, Belfast; **4 MAY** Carlisle Road Methodist Church, Derry; **5 MAY** The Sugar Club, Dublin. *lau-music.co.uk*

Leveret
Cutting, Harbron and Sweeney
18 APR Pavilion Arts Centre, Buxton; **19 APR** Reeth Memorial Hall; **20 APR** Trinity Arts, Gainsborough; **23 APR** South Street Arts, Reading; **24 APR** Norwegian Church, Cardiff; **25 APR** Pontardawe Arts Centre; **26 APR** Nailsea Folk Club. *leveretband.com*

The Longest Johns
New album from sea shanty trio
24 APR Cyprus Avenue, Cork; **25 APR** Upstairs at Dolan's, Limerick; **26 APR** Opium, Dublin; **27 APR** Limelight 2, Belfast. *thelongestjohns.com*

Daniel Martinez
And his Flamenco Company
27 APR Northern Stage, Newcastle upon Tyne; **28 APR** Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford; **2 MAY** Royal Hippodrome, Eastbourne; **3 MAY** The Forum, Bath; **5 MAY** Kings Place, London; **7 MAY** Albert Halls, Bolton; **8 MAY** The Little Theatre, Leicester; **9 MAY** King George's Hall, Blackburn; **10 MAY** Ipswich Corn Exchange; **12 MAY** West Road Concert Hall, Cambridge. *danielmartinezflamenco.com*

Mugenkyo Taiko Drummers
Exhilarating Japanese drums
7 MAY The Coro, Ulverston; **8 MAY** St George's Hall, Bradford; **9 MAY** Floral Pavilion, New Brighton; **10 MAY** Forum Theatre, Malvern; **11 MAY** The Playhouse, Weston super Mare; **12 MAY** New Theatre Royal, Portsmouth; **14 MAY** Newbury Spring Festival; **15 MAY** The Stables, Milton Keynes; **16 MAY** Lyceum Theatre, Crewe. *taiko.co.uk*

The Nordic Fiddlers Bloc
Unadulterated folk fiddling
2 MAY Tolbooth, Stirling; **3 MAY** Lochinver Village Hall; **4 MAY** Universal Hall, Findhorn; **5 MAY** Edinburgh Tradfest; **6 MAY** Settle Victoria Hall; **7 MAY** The Fleece Inn, Bretforton; **8 MAY** Lakeside Arts, Nottingham; **9 MAY** St Olav's Norwegian Church, London; **10 MAY** Stapleford Granary; **11-12 MAY** Baltimore Fiddle Fair. *thenordicfiddlersbloc.com*

Orchestra Baobab
A new album to celebrate 50 years
2 MAY KOKO, London; **3 MAY** Cheltenham Town Hall; **4 MAY** Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray; **5 MAY** The Lantern, Bristol; **6 MAY** Princess Pavilion, Falmouth; **7 MAY** Brighton Dome; **8 MAY** Lighthouse Poole; **9 MAY** Brewery Arts, Kendal; **10 MAY** Howard Assembly Room, Leeds. *orchestrabaobab.com*

Pink Martini
Latin-jazz-cabaret from Oregon
29 APR The Bridgewater Hall, Manchester; **30 APR** Usher Hall, Edinburgh; **2 MAY** New Theatre, Oxford; **3 MAY** Bristol Beacon; **4 MAY** Cliffs Pavilion, Southend-on-Sea; **5 MAY** Royal Albert Hall, London. *pinkmartini.com*

Katherine Priddy
Touring The Pendulum Swing
1 MAY Strange Brew, Bristol; **2 MAY** Exeter Phoenix; **3 MAY** Acapela Studios, Cardiff; **4 MAY** Ropetackle, Shoreham-by-Sea; **5 MAY** The Glee Club, Birmingham; **7 MAY** The Stables, Milton Keynes; **8 MAY** Band on the Wall, Manchester; **9 MAY** Music Room, Liverpool; **10 MAY** The Sugar Club, Dublin; **11 MAY** St Joseph's Church, Belfast; **14 MAY** Brewery Arts, Kendal; **15 MAY** The Crescent, York; **16 MAY** The Live Room, Saltaire. *katherinepriddy.co.uk*

The Rheingans Sisters
Playful, powerful and poignant
5 APR Blackheath Halls, London; **7 APR** Widcombe Social Club, Bath; **10 APR** Cuffern Manor, Haverfordwest; **11 APR** The Art Shop & Chapel, Abergavenny; **13 APR** The Heron Theatre, Beetham. *rheinganssisters.co.uk*

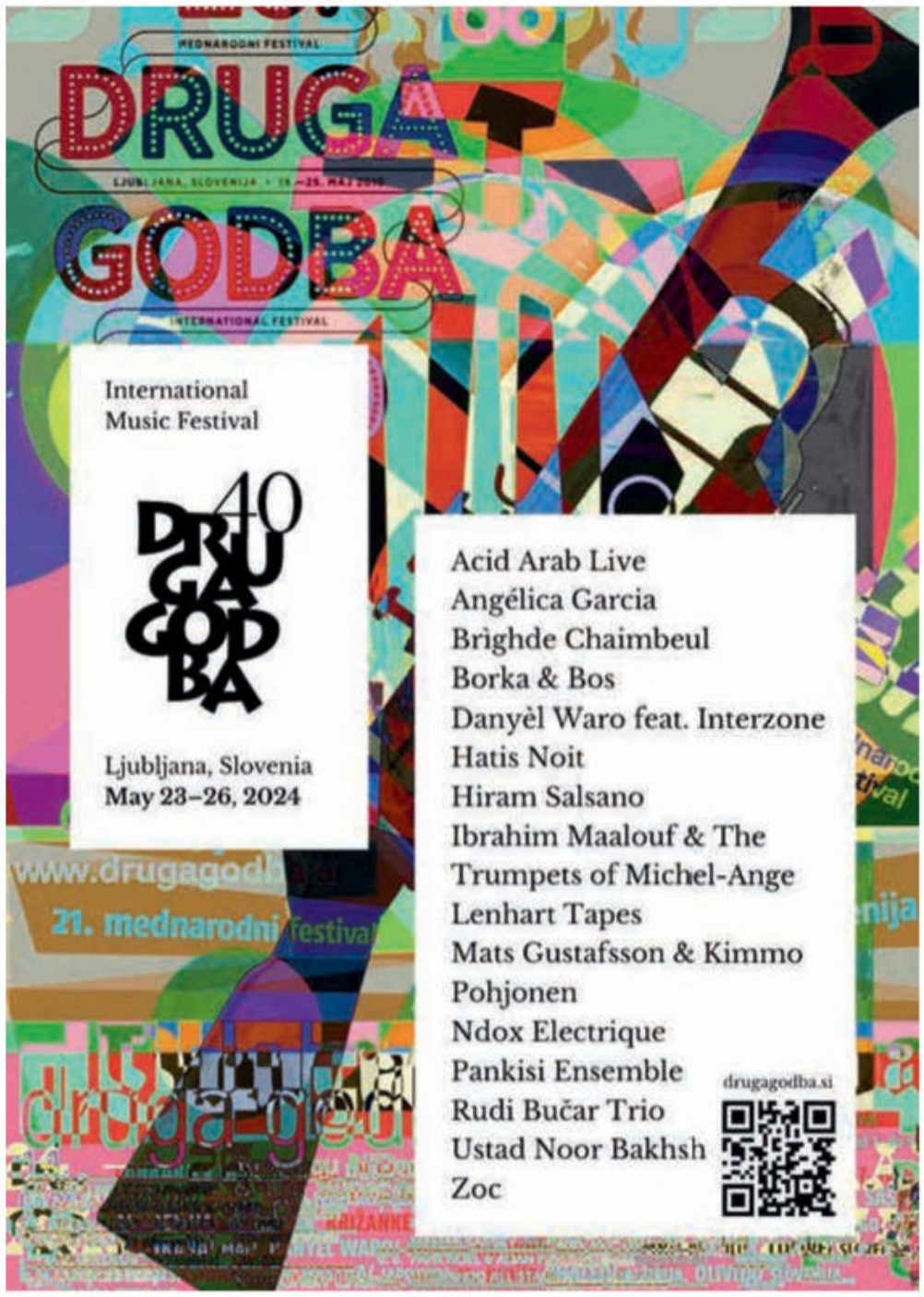
Kate Rusby
Singy Songy Session tour
12 APR Buxton Opera House; **13 APR** The Baths Hall, Scunthorpe; **14 APR** Victoria Theatre, Halifax; **18 APR** Pavilion Theatre, Glasgow; **21 APR** Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury; **22 APR** Floral Pavilion, New Brighton; **25 APR** Exeter Corn Exchange; **26 APR** Memorial Theatre, Frome; **27 APR** Lighthouse Poole; **7 MAY** Assembly Hall Theatre, Tunbridge Wells; **8 MAY** Oxford Playhouse; **9 MAY** The Cresset, Peterborough; **11 MAY** Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry; **12 MAY** Pavilion Theatre, Worthing; **13 MAY** Churchill Theatre, Bromley; **14 MAY** The Apex, Bury St Edmunds. *katerusby.com*

Sharon Shannon
Irish accordion legend with band
12 APR Civic Theatre, Tallaght; **13 APR** Riverbank Arts, Newbridge; **20 APR** Source Arts Centre, Thurles; **26 APR** Visual, Carlow; **27 APR** Pavilion Theatre, Dún Laoghaire; **3 MAY** Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise

Omar Sosa & Seckou Keita
With Gustavo Ovalles
7 MAY Riverside, Newcastle upon Tyne; **8 MAY** Invisible Wind Factory, Liverpool; **9 MAY** Band on the Wall, Manchester; **10 MAY** The Wardrobe, Leeds; **11 MAY** Lafayette, London. *seckoukeita.com*

Spiers & Boden
The originators of Bellowhead
10 APR Theatre Royal, Winchester; **11 APR** Norden Farm, Maidenhead; **12 APR** The Y Theatre, Leicester; **13 APR** The Mill, Banbury; **15 APR** Colchester Arts Centre; **16 APR** St Andrew's Church, Hertford; **4 MAY** Bristol Folk Festival. *spiersandboden.com*

Tarren
Cittern, accordion, fiddle, voice
10 APR Hambledon Folk Club; **13 APR** Ashburton Arts Centre, Newton Abbot; **14 APR** The Prince Albert, Stroud; **17 APR** Cecil Sharp House, London; **18 APR** Kitchen Garden Cafe, Birmingham; **19 APR** The Greystones, Sheffield; **20 APR** The Talbot Theatre, Whitchurch; **21 APR** Bristol Folk House. *tarrenmusic.com*



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www.rudolstadt-festival.de tickets: www.tixforgigs.com

MAY–JUNE 2024

Festival Guide

Gilberto Gil at WOMADelaide 2024

Dianne Brooks

REVIEW

WOMADelaide
Adelaide, Australia
March 8-11

Whether delivered with righteous anger or dreamy slo-mo serenity, the message, overwhelmingly, was peace. Peace, and justice: Melanesian and First Nations supergroup Wantok Sing Sing brought together 16 musicians including Pitjantjatjara elder Uncle Frank Yamma all sharing songs, stories and language, the Morning Star flag of occupied West Papua flying free. Powerhouse Tunisian-American diva EMEL waved a Palestinian flag as she paced the stage in a billowing white gown, then sang full-throated feminist anthems while beating a bass drum with mallets.

Ukrainian folk quartet DakhaBrakha delivered a masterclass in political artistry, juxtaposing polyphonic harmonies and cello, drums and accordion styles gleaned from several ethnic groups with arresting black-and-white visuals of their country's war with Russia. Headlining the main stage on Friday – during a weekend heatwave that saw temperatures soar around 40 degrees Celsius – Afrobeat scion Seun Kuti led his late father's Egypt 80 orchestra through an incendiary set that included freestyle sax solos, the Fela classic 'Zombie' and impassioned political banter: "I'm from Nigeria, the belly of the beast," he told the crowd with its gaggle of pro-Palestinian supporters. "I've been protesting [against injustice] for years."

Guesting with Seun with bum-shaking verve was Pongo, the Portuguese-Angolan *kuduro* star whose handful of solo performances each concluded with her in the crowd, surrounded by an exuberant dance circle. Joy, too, was everywhere, despite the heat and the real-world reminders: the farewell set from Brazilian demi-god Gilberto Gil, accompanied by his family band, had a liberating lightness of touch. Sampa the Great, there as a punter, turned up onstage with both Angélique Kidjo [a late replacement for Nitin Sawhney] and Zamrock legends WITCH, whose lead singer Jagari Chanda later took part in an Artist-in-Conversation with Senegalese superstar Baaba Maal, deftly celebrating their musical similarities and differences.

Which is what WOMADelaide does so beautifully and will go the extra mile to do: "Maybe you don't realise what a special festival this is," said Ian Brennan, introducing Rwandan farmer duo The Good Ones, whose sweet-voiced acoustic songs belied their weighty, war-prompted subject matter, and who came because, well, they were invited. "It is exceptional to the world, and it is important that it survives."

JANE CORNWELL

LISTINGS

May 2-5
Shetland Folk Festival
Shetland
shetlandfolkfestival.com

May 3-13
Edinburgh TradFest
Edinburgh
edinburghtradfest.com

May 4-26
Brighton Festival
Brighton
brightonfestival.org

May 10-26
Norfolk & Norwich Festival
Norfolk
nnfestival.org.uk

May 15-18
The Great Escape
Brighton
greatescapefestival.com

May 15-22
Afro-Pfingsten
Winterthur, Switzerland
afro-pfingsten.ch

May 17-19
Festival des Musiciens du Monde
Montreal, Canada
centredesmusiciens dumonde.com

May 17-26
The Bath Festival
Bath, Somerset
bathfestivals.org.uk/the-bath-festival

May 18-20
Music Meeting Festival
Nijmegen, The Netherlands
musicmeeting.nl

May 23-26
Druga Godba
Ljubljana & Maribor, Slovenia
drugagodba.si/en/festival

May 23-26
Orkney Folk Festival
Orkney
orkneyfolkfestival.com

May 25 – June 3
Fleadh Nua
Ennis, Co. Clare, Ireland
fleadhnua.com

May 30 – June 3
Fire in the Mountain
Near Aberystwyth, Ceredigion
A folk culture haven between the Cambrian mountains and Cardigan bay. Sam Lee, Cerys Hafana, Sam Amidon and more confirmed for 2024.
fireinthemountain.co.uk

May 31 – June 2
MTN Bushfire
Malkerns, Eswatini
bush-fire.com

June 4-15
Flamenco Festival London
Saddler's Wells, London
sadlerswells.com/flamenco-festival-2024

June 6-8
Musiques Métisses
Angoulême, France
musiques-metisses.com

June 7-9
Sakifo Festival
Saint-Pierre, La Réunion
sakifo.com/festival

June 7-9
KITE
Kirtlington Park, Oxfordshire
kitefestival.co.uk

June 8-9
The Reeling
Glasgow
thereeling.com

June 12-16
¡Rio Loco!
Toulouse, France
rio-loco.org

June 14-16
Solas Festival
Errol, Perthshire
solasfestival.co.uk

June 15-16
Houtfestival
Haarlem, The Netherlands
houtfestival.nl

June 15, July 27 & Sept 7
Green Island Festival
Hulme, Manchester
greenislandfestival.co.uk

June 20-23
Telluride Bluegrass Festival
Telluride, Colorado, US
Béla Fleck, Zakir Hussain, Molly Tuttle, Chris Thile, Punch Brothers, Mighty Poplar and more.
bluegrass.com/telluride

June 21-23
Les 5 Continents
Martigny, Switzerland
5continents.ch

June 21-23
Góbé Fest
Manchester
gobefest.com

June 22-23
Africa Oyé
Liverpool
The UK's largest celebration of African music and culture, this year's headliners are Les Amazones d'Afrique and Julian Marley.
africaoye.com

June 22-29
Festspillene i Nord-Norge
Harstad, Norway
festspillnn.no/en

June 23-30
Jewish Culture Festival
Kraków, Poland
jewishfestival.pl/en

June 26-30
Glastonbury
Pilton, Somerset
glastonburyfestivals.co.uk

June 28-30
Rainforest World Music Festival
Sarawak, Malaysia
rwmf.net

**ALL EVENTS ARE UK UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED*

Peter Schuhmann

PREVIEW

Africa Festival

WHEN: May 30 – June 2

WHERE: Würzburg, Germany

What the festival says:
'The International Africa Festival has been existing since 1989 and is the largest and oldest festival for African music and culture in Europe. More than 7,630 musicians and artists from 56 countries of Africa and the Caribbean have performed in Würzburg so far and about 2,675 000 visitors have heard, seen and tasted the cultural wealth of the African continent.'

What we said:
'With a great location next to the Main river in Würzberg, Africa Festival brings together a solid line-up of Africa's finest. Würzberg, a historic Bavarian city famous for its wines, architecture and culture, proves a perfect environment for a festival that also includes films, exhibitions, awards and a lively children's programme.

Who's playing?
There's a wide-ranging selection of artists with Mali's Fatoumata Diawara and Ivorian roots reggae legend Tiken Jah Fakoly perhaps the two biggest names. Fafa Ruffino, a member of Les Amazones d'Afrique, will no doubt pull out all the stops, as will BANTU, the hard-hitting Afrobeat outfit, and there are sure to be a few surprises too. A busy schedule of children's activities, markets, films and exhibitions round out a fine line-up.

ONLINE: africafestival.org/en

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– The Pulse

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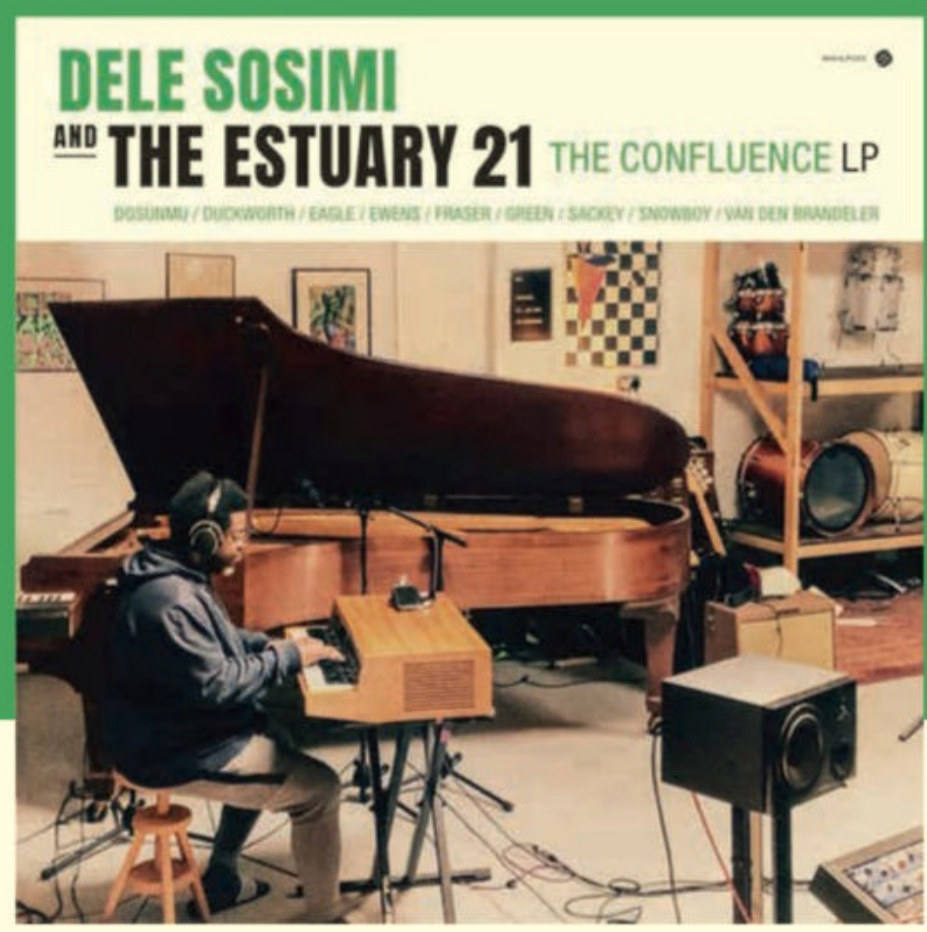

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Clash Magazine

www.wahwah45s.com
Distributed by Kudos Records

L-R: Dele Sosimi recording *The Confluence*; Dele leading his Afrobeat Orchestra

Dele Sosimi spent the 80s globetrotting with Fela, even taking the reins of his 20-piece band, bringing joy and peace to Lagos' chaotic commune where they lived, played and partied

Dele Sosimi's debut album was called *Turbulent Times* for good reason. He was just 12 when his father, a banker, was assassinated in 1975, purportedly by those he was investigating for embezzlement. Born in London where his parents were studying, Dele was moved back to Lagos with them aged four, later becoming friends with Femi Kuti, eldest son of Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti — the Pan-Africanist composer, musician and founder of Afrobeat whose activism against government corruption set him on a collision course with the Nigerian authorities. Enraged by his ridiculing of them on his 1977 album *Zombie*, soldiers burnt down Fela's commune, Kalakuta Republic – with Fela's mother sustaining injuries that ultimately led to her death – and closed his nightclub-cum-performance venue, the Shrine.

"'Your dad died on duty, trying to make the country better,' Fela told me when I went to his house one day with Femi after school. 'And I will fight for your family, once I win my own court case against the government,'" Dele relates this to me, now back in London, where he's preparing for a series of concerts and the release of his new album, *The Confluence*.

"Femi and I were members of our high school band and Fela gave us access to his backline. I wanted to join Fela's band, but he told me to finish my exams first. Even so, I'd still go to the (reopened) Shrine on a Friday and stay through 'til Sunday. Fela would come on stage just after midnight and play until 5am."

"I saw some great parties there, too. Fela loved to party and the Shrine was the only place to do it. People like Roy Ayers would come over to play a gig at the US embassy and want to party afterwards, but everywhere in Lagos closed at 10pm." Everywhere except the Shrine, which Fela had declared a state independent from Nigeria.

In 1979, just 16, Dele finally joined Fela's band, Egypt 80, playing rhythm keyboard in Lagos and on tour around the world. Dele became tasked with keeping the band in check. "Nigeria is hard and some of the musicians were looking for opportunities to live elsewhere. Often, the younger ones would meet a girl, in Europe or America, fall in love and sneak off to live with them. Once back in Nigeria, Dele would train new recruits to replace the musicians they'd lost. "We'd try to get back to Lagos for Tuesday, so I had until Friday night, when gigs started, to get them 'Shrine ready.' It was only ever the males who left though, never women — mainly because they were all Fela's wives!"

Though Fela's sexual appetite was legendary, the reason for his polygamy wasn't just libido. After the attack on the Shrine rendered many of the band homeless, Fela married 27 of his female backing singers and dancers, collectively called The Queens. This enabled them to live, within Nigerian law, under his protection. That's not to say he wasn't enjoying his conjugal rights, too – but it was a consensual arrangement.

When Fela was imprisoned in 1984 – given five years for (possibly politically motivated) currency smuggling charges – Femi took over the band and Dele became musical director.

"If Fela wasn't going to be with us, we needed to up our game to still attract people to the Shrine each weekend. We instilled discipline in the band and ran everything in a professional way. [Femi] even ban[ned] the smoking of weed at the Shrine, so not to give authorities another excuse to shut us down."

Fela was released after two years, following international pressure by the likes of Amnesty International, and supporters such as Herbie Hancock and David Byrne. But when he came back, it was time for Dele and Femi to leave.

"We'd held Egypt 80 together while Fela was away. Everything was running smoothly. But when he came back, he didn't have the same discipline. Rehearsals started at 3pm but there we were, still waiting for him at 11pm. He'd been sleeping with women all day and was high as a kite. We were disappointed. Fela [had been] on the verge of conquering the world."

Dele and Femi left to form their own band, Positive Force, playing at events such as the Montreux and North Sea Jazz festivals. Since then, Dele has recorded and performed both solo and collaboratively with major artists, in Afrobeat and other genres. He's also become a teacher, lecturing at London's Trinity Laban Conservatoire, Cardiff University and BIMM Music Institute in Bristol, where his students call him 'Professor Afrobeat'.

But Dele still has respect and gratitude for what Fela – who died in 1997 – taught him about life, music and fighting injustice.

"Fela was a radical who taught us about radicality. I still miss him."

As told by Russell Higham

***+ Dele Sosimi & The Estuary 21**'s new album The Confluence is released by Wah Wah 45s*

Robert Humm

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COMPETITION

TO WIN *First Prize* - **A genuine Kora, shipped from Gambia - a real playable instrument!**
Second Prize - **5 pairs of tickets for Sona's concert at The Barbican, London, 11th May, 2024**
Third Prize - **A** *Badinyaa Kumoo* **CD signed by Sona** *(5 available to win)*

Just email the answers to these 3 questions to: *competition@mintakamusic.com*

1. Who in Sona's family played the kora before her?
2. What flattering title has been bestowed on Sona that she is uncomfortable with?
3. What advice did Sona's father give her about playing the kora?

The answers to these questions can be found in the issue of Songlines with Sona Jobarteh on the cover (№173, December 2021) and in the feature on Songlines website.

Competition entries must be received by midnight on Sunday 21st April 2024.
The judges decision is final

mintaka music
www.mintakamusic.com
sonajobarteh.com

Eliza Carthy's NEWS OF THE WHIRL

Eliza reflects on the positives and pitfalls of using social media as a folkie. "It's a hopeful one for the homemade musician," she discovers

Social media. If there were any positives to come out of the pandemic, one of them must surely have been the ways that independent musicians have taken control of their own houses. Largely we, as a cottage industry, have decided to stop waiting for a mythical label to point the giant lottery finger at us and bestow buckets of cash and cachet for us to serve our art and our dreams.

During lockdown, I joined Clubhouse, as did many sitting with their cats on their knees, looking through the hopeful window to the world that is the internet. Through algorithms directed by choosing your interests when you sign up, I met The Songwriting Academy, and surfed various rooms offering advice on how to manage social media, maximise my potential and push my envelope into actualising my something or others…

In all seriousness though, I did learn a lot. I learned that there are ideal times to post, how not to make your simultaneous posts across platforms so similar that the algorithms punish you (?!), how to create personalised content for your fans so that they feel that they know you, and so on.

Oof, that last sentence makes it feel terribly false. But I can honestly say that involving myself in my own social media has helped me feel connected to my audience, and them to me. Folk music does lend itself to that kind of connection. We're not in the business of business, it's community-led music and reaching out to that community during such an isolated time, and since, has felt right and unifying. And sometimes inspiring! They can be a fun and creative crowd.

There are plenty of artists out there who don't feel that social media is for them. Once you get to a certain level I imagine that having your adoring people respond to your every move, and the negative pushback that seems to invariably happen with success, must be terribly difficult to manage. The personal connection is great until it's intrusive, inappropriate or unwanted, which is why celebrities frequently deactivate their accounts to give themselves a breather.

Some of them make good points. James Blake, for instance, points out in a recent thread: '*I spent the years I could have been learning how to be good at Instagram refining and evolving my music.*'

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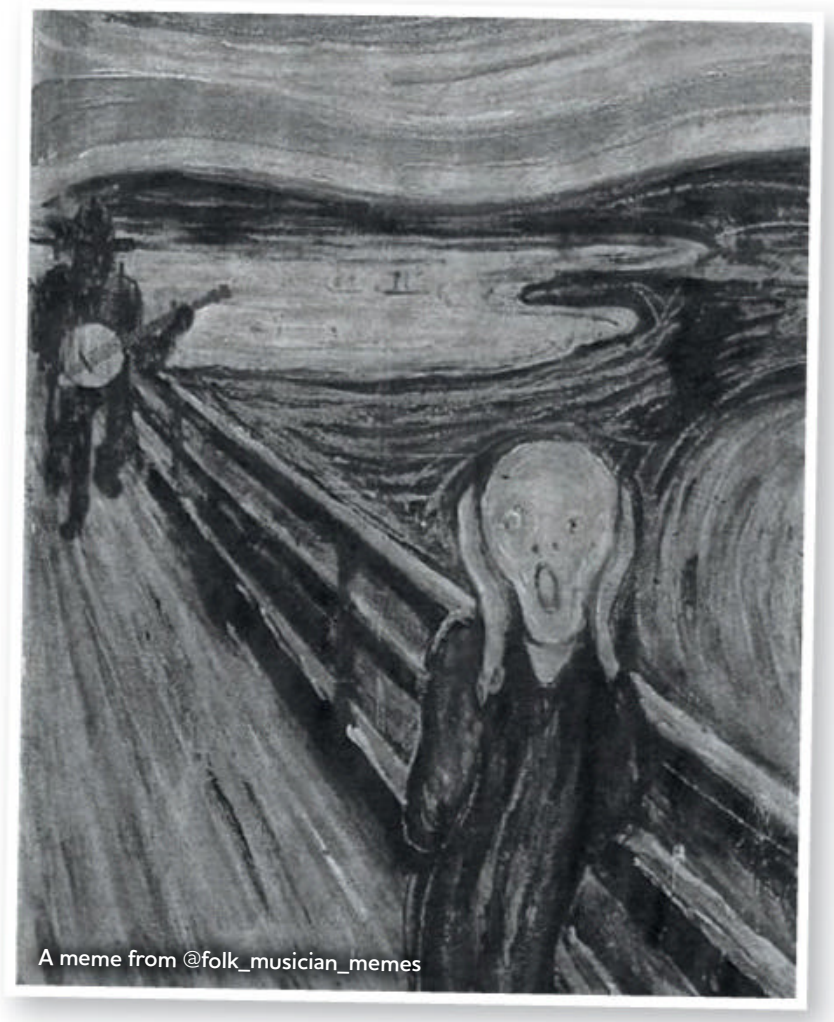
To a certain extent, he's not wrong. It would be lovely to be able to concentrate on art and employ people to do our taxes, push our pens and run our Patreons. There is a section of the creative community that thinks that artists should just be artists. For sure many talented people in the world could run my little business better than I can. But for most of us, that's not an option, or it's only an option during specific times when pushing new releases and special projects; it's also inspiring to watch grassroots musicians take control and speak in the language that most of the buying public responds to.

Okay, so not many of us do TikTok. But some do! US-based vocal group Windborne hit TikTok gold with a piece of plainsong inspired by the unlikely pairing of Sir Mix-A-Lot's famous paean to the larger female behind and the '*one of us always tells the truth, and one of us always lies*' scene from *Labyrinth*: bit.ly/windbornesingers.

And we have memes now! Two favourite Instagram accounts are @folk_musician_memes and @englishfolkmusicmemes, both hilarious to the nerd in me.

If you haven't spotted yet, I am firmly on the side of engaging and I enjoy following my peers and fellow nerds online. Through social media, I have learned what they're up to and the various ways in which we are all navigating this new time, a time of declining physical media, streaming services that still refuse to pay anything decent and audiences reluctant to turn up to shows. I have felt solidarity with them during a time when we have not been able to mix in person; I have gained inspiration and watched shows I might not have been able to otherwise. It is a new normal, but I do believe it is a hopeful one for the homemade musician. ◆



A meme from @folk_musician_memes

ABOUT ELIZA

Born into a musical dynasty – her mother is Norma Waterson of The Watersons and her father is influential singer and guitarist Martin Carthy – Eliza Carthy is one of the most recognisable faces in British folk music.

SONGLINES
ESSENTIAL
10

AFRO-BRAZILIAN SPIRITUALS

Driven by *axé* (energy) in service to the *orixás* (gods), these top albums, selected by ***Russ Slater Johnson***, draw on Brazil's African diasporic religions and spirituality

01 Clementina de Jesus, Doca & Geraldo Filme
O Canto dos Escravos
(Estúdio Eldorado, 1982)

Samba de partido alto singer Clementina de Jesus was only discovered in the 60s when she was already in her 60s herself, but she instantly blazed a trail for Afro-Brazilian music from Rio de Janeiro. She performed with Pixinguinha, Milton Nascimento, Naná Vasconcelos and cut the defining 'Marinheiro Só'. This collection of slave songs from Minas Gerais, in which she shares vocal duties with Doca and Geraldo Filme, is one of many career highlights.

02 Serena Assumpção
Ascensão
(Selo Sesc, 2016)

The title's *ascensão* (ascension) refers to every life's journey, ascending from the visible to the invisible realm. Based on the cosmogony and ceremonies of Nagos (Brazilian Yorubans), the songs pair popular music with the energy and spirituality of the *terreiros* (temples). This is the only album recorded by Serena, who died at 39, months before its release; her music lives on.

03 As Ganhadeiras de Itapuã
As Ganhadeiras de Itapuã
(Coaxo do Sapo, 2014)

Stunning harmonies from generations of female singers that carry on the traditions of the Afro-Brazilian washerwomen of Lagoa do Abaeté in Itapuã, Salvador. Set to a *samba de roda* beat, these are work songs referencing gods Iemanjá and Oxum, a consequence of Itapuã's position as a sacred site, epitomised by the Lavagem de Itapuã festival every Feb 2.

04 Juçara Marçal & Kiko Dinucci
Padê
(Tratore / Selo Cooperativa, 2008)

Singer Marçal and guitarist Dinucci would go on to form Metá-Metá with saxophonist Thiago França, but they laid the framework for the group here, paying respect to Brazilian popular music's African ancestry while exploring their religious beliefs. Dinucci started his career in punk bands and he brings an attack to his guitar-playing throughout, while Marçal's voice erupts and caresses.

05 Os Tinçôas
Os Tinçôas
(Odeon, 1973)

If there was a category for spiritual pop music then Os Tinçôas would be its leading lights. With only the simplest of instrumentation (guitar, congas, *agogô* and *shekere*) this is all about the vocal harmonies of the three main members whose style was heavily influenced by Bahia's Candomblé *terreiros*. 'Deixa a Gira Girá' remains one of the greatest vocal performances ever put to tape.

06 Various Artists
Oriki – Chants & danses du Candomble
(Arion, 2003)

One of the best recordings of Candomblé chants and songs, as would be heard in *terreiros*, with performances by four different *nações* (nations) paying homage to Exu, Ogun, Oxossi, Xangô and other *orixás*. Accompanied by *atabaque* drums and bells such as the *agogô*, it's easy to lose oneself in the devoted call-and-response vocals.

07 Orquestra Afro-Brasileira
80 Anos
(Day Dreamer, 2021)

Orquestra Afro-Brasileira formed in 1942, recording their debut album in 1957. From the off, their mission was to present Black Brazilian histories in a big band format that incorporated Candomblé chants and African percussion. Surprisingly, in 2021, they released a new album led by Carlos Negreiros, who had been in the band on their second album in 1968. Not only did it continue their mission, but it proved they were still as vital, and needed, as ever.

08 Vinícius de Moraes & Baden Powell
Os Afro-Sambas
(Forma, 1966)

When one of Brazil's most prominent songwriters and one of its guitar greats realised they had both become fascinated by Candomblé, they decided to record an album together with the help of vocal group Quarteto em Cy. The result has since become a template for any album combining acoustic samba with Afro-Brazilian spirituality, with songs like 'Canto de Ossanha' losing none of their ability to astonish after all these years.

09 Virgínia Rodrigues
Nós
(Natasha Records, 2000)

Born in Salvador, Rodrigues grew up singing in Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as Candomblé *terreiros*, and she brings a syncretic approach to this collection of songs inspired by carnival in Bahia which pay tribute to many *orixás*. With hints of Milton Nascimento, Cesária Évora and the aforementioned *Os Afro-Sambas*, it's a stunning album that sits somewhere between pop, classical and gospel.

10 Olodum
Da Atlântida À Bahia... O Mar É O Caminho
(Continental, 1991)

So tied is carnival with Afro-Brazilian religion that there's an endless list of *blocos* (carnival groups) from across Brazil that could feature here. Olodum, for their sheer popularity and stellar recording career, are near the top. *De Atlântida* is a great entry point, with paeans to Iemanjá, their punchy fisherman's chant ('Canto ao Pescador') and Jimmy Cliff guesting as they perfect their samba-reggae formula.

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